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RANCH ROMANCES

Enemy Ground

By MYRTLE JULIETTE COREY

Second March Number

Beginning

You Texan

By JAMES W. ROUTH

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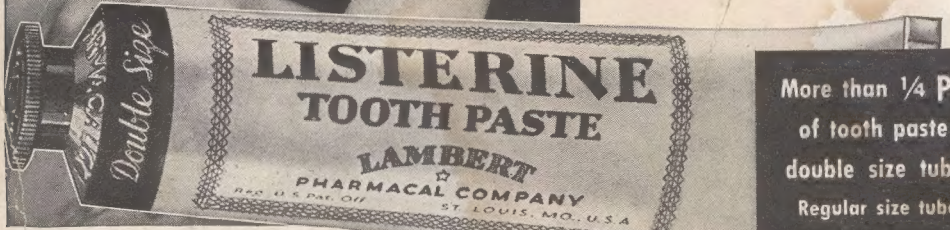

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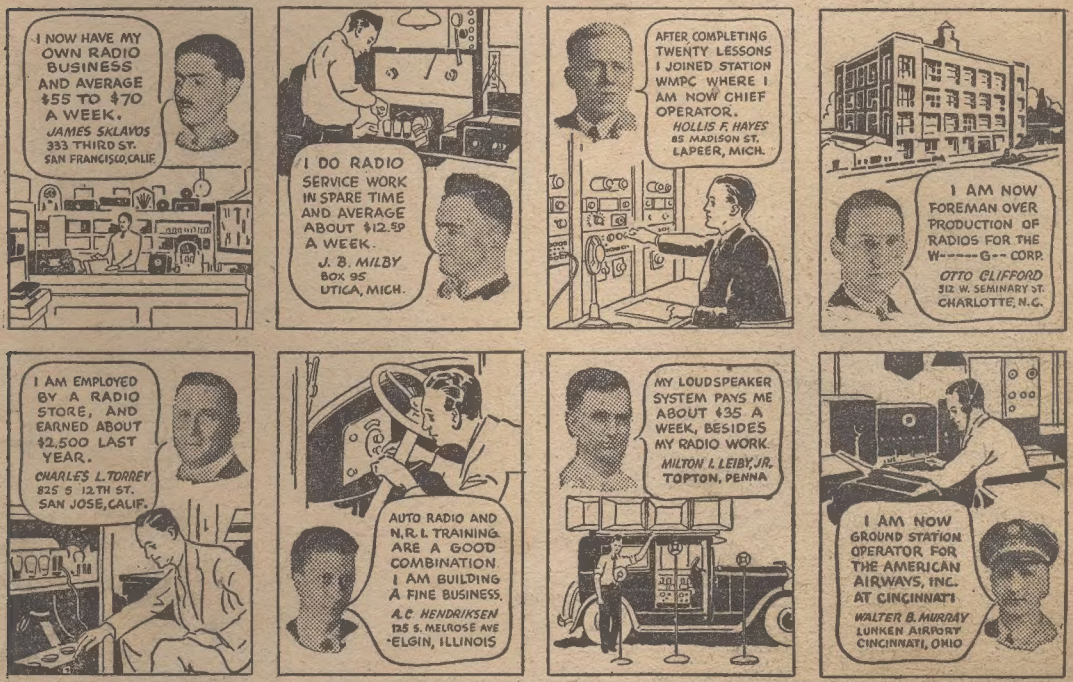
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Vol. LXXII

RANCH ROMANCES

No. 4

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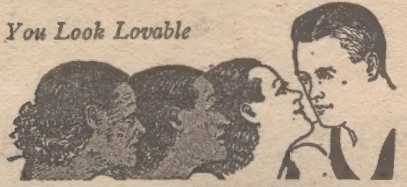

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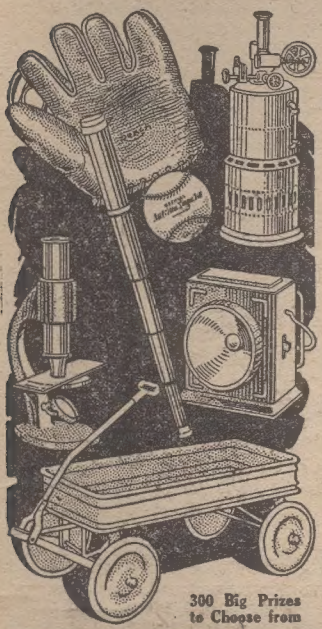

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5.25-17	2.90	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
5.50-17	3.35	1.15
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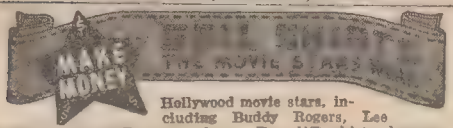

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Enemy Ground

By Myrtle Juliette Corey

The Hawk plundered and murdered throughout the range until the strange cowboy tracked him to that ghost-town den where greed vied with courage and love with hate.

CHAPTER I

Owner of the Ox Bow

OX BOW CANYON lay a winding streak of dense blackness far below the moon-tipped peaks, and Bret Temple knew that dark streak was the heart of Neal Crawford's range—Bret's future home. His horse stepped along the slanting ridge that dropped him lower and lower into the canyon, while a lacework of fleecy clouds veiled the moon and blotted out the stars.

"Don't just like the idea of seeing the place for the first time buried under such a black shadow," he thought.

At the canyon level he permitted his tired, thirsty mount to drink from the clear waters of Sarvice Creek. Suddenly he felt the tensing of the animal, sensed rather than saw the pricking of the sensitive ears as the head came up. Bret listened intently. From up the creek came the steady, rapid advance of hoofs. This continued till he headed his own horse back into the trail, then as he rode to meet them, the sounds suddenly ceased. This was strange. The abrupt halting of the rider had an effect of furtiveness.

Temple rode slowly on, all his senses alert. There was no further sound save the lapping of the water and the soft rustling of leaves among the young box alders and cottonwoods. Whether some of this disturbance was caused by movements of the unseen horseman, he was unable to determine. Yet sensitive nerves assured him that someone was near—someone who avoided encounter.

When he reached the bend, he reined in. After a moment's wait he heard the

click of metal against stone and recalled a rocky ledge he had recently crossed. A shod hoof treading there had caused that metallic sound.

"Queer thing," he thought. "Not wanting to meet me. And the fellow must've come from the Ox Bow. Crawford said he had the only outfit in here and that the canyon boxed up, above his place."

Speculations on the mysterious night rider were swept from his thoughts as his keen eye caught the bulk of buildings ahead. He passed a large corral. Beyond this and to the right, a wide blotch seemed to be the ranch house, and Temple headed up the slope to this. It was dark and silent, but only natural at an hour approaching midnight. Outlines of the log structure with its wide front porch became plain.

Dismounting, Bret looped his reins about a post near the steps, which he mounted with a tinkling of spurs that seemed unusually loud in the enveloping stillness. His knocking on the door panel was almost explosive. Yet there was no reply, no sound nor movement within.

He pounded more loudly. The silence of the house stirred odd sensations. Swathed in gloom, the barely discernible windows were like sightless eyes, dead eyes staring at him. With a shake of his muscular shoulders he threw off that thought, once more pounding on the door as he called:

"Hullo, Crawford! Wake up!"

At that moment a light shone from a low building near the corral, and a man came hastily toward the house.

"Hello! What is it?" he asked.

"I take it this is the Ox Bow," Temple replied. "I'm trying to raise Crawford. I'm Bret Temple."

"Oh! He's expecting you. I'm Jack Wade. Heard your racket and it's funny you haven't roused Neal."

Wade went to the door, shaking it vigorously. "Neal! Oh, Neal!"

There was no reply. He turned the knob. The door swung open on a dark interior. Neither man spoke as he stepped inside, Temple waiting near the threshold while Wade struck a match and went to a table where stood an oil lamp. The flickering match flame intensified the blackness of the room, while the absolute soundlessness of the big house held an oppressive portent.

As the wick ignited, Bret's gaze swept the room—halted. On the floor near a big desk lay the figure of a tall, old man.

"Neal!" Temple sprang forward to stoop over the inert form.

"Lord, he's had a stroke!" Wade exclaimed.

"He's dead!" Bret declared in a tense voice, pointing to a bruised spot behind the right ear. The scalp was cut, blood oozing into the thick, white hair.

"Got dizzy, fell and struck his head on the desk corner," Wade said.

Temple made no reply. His lips were compressed, the greenish gray eyes looked black between their dark lashes as he examined the wound. Would anyone attacked by vertigo fall in such manner as to strike that part of the head? Possibly. But doubt bit deeply into Bret's mind. He came to his feet, speaking with decision.

"Send for the sheriff and the coroner at once. They'd better look things over."

"You think somebody slugged him?" Wade asked quickly.

"Might've," was the noncommittal reply. Temple was recalling the furtive rider who had gone down the creek so short a time before. Neal's body was still warm. If he had been murdered, it probably was within the hour. Bret's lips parted for speech, then closed. He was in a strange country. He knew nothing of the men working for the Ox Bow, had no idea what complications the situation might hold. For the present he'd say nothing.

He would find out the truth. If this was murder, the one responsible should pay the uttermost penalty.

"Don't s'pose the old man had an enemy in the world," Wade went on. "It musta been somebody who knew he

BRET TEMPLE

kept a bunch of money on the place."

"Hear any sounds from the house tonight, or anyone riding in?" Bret asked.

"We turned in early and I went right to sleep. Never heard a thing till you was pounding on the door."

"All right. Have one of the boys ride to town, notify the sheriff and bring back the coroner," Temple said by way of dismissal. Until his own arrival to take over the management of the ranch, he knew Wade had been acting as foreman.

As the latter disappeared, Temple moved about looking over the room. He could see nothing that might have been used as a weapon.

"Fellow could've knocked Neal out with his gun butt," he reflected, again stooping over the body for a close look at the wound. As he rested a hand on the floor, he felt a small, hard object under the palm and picked up an irregularly shaped segment of a button, glancing at it absent-mindedly.

He was about to toss it away when a suggestion penetrated his abstraction, and he held it to the light for a closer look. It was almost half of a coat button, broken just short of the holes through which it had been fastened, and was a rich, dark brown with mottlings of a peculiar yellow. It was such an ornament as is used on fancy sport clothes. Crawford had been in his shirt sleeves. From whence had the piece of button come? Hardly from any garment liable to be worn by the old ranch owner.

Lying close to the body, it could easily have dropped as the murderer bent over to see if his blow had been fatal. The button had been cracked, and when the killer brushed against his victim's body in making his inspection, the bit had been pulled loose, falling where Temple found it. Thoughtfully Bret dropped it into his pocket.

He was deeply shaken. Crawford had been his father's closest friend, the two having been partners in their youth. At intervals since the elder Temple's death, Bret had seen Neal, the bond between young man and old becoming a close one. On Crawford's recent return from several years spent in South America, during which time he had accumulated a fortune, he had sought Temple, engaging him to take charge of the Ox Bow with the understanding that he should have a substantial interest in the ranch. Crawford had arrived at an age when he wanted to turn over active duties to someone else, and he was possessed of no living relatives.

Each moment since entering the room, Bret had been more thoroughly convinced that murder had been done. And certain suspicions were steadily growing stronger. From a pocket he drew an opened letter, re-reading it thoughtfully. One paragraph held his attention.

> . . . Keep this to yourself, but I'm almost sure that in Colorow the other day, I saw the outlaw that got away from the Satsuma Bank three years ago. Remember, his mask slipped and I saw his face, and I'm the only one who can positively identify him. He killed the cashier and the president and almost got me as I went in the door.
>
> His two mates who were caught, took their medicine in silence. They were more afraid to squeal on their leader than to take the consequences of the law. I know where to find the fellow I saw in Colorow, and as soon's you get here, I'll take a trip to Ballarat, and see if he's the right one for sure.

Bret remembered the facts of the sensational Satsuma Bank robbery and murders, which had been the climax of similar ones in other banks. The escaped outlaw leader would not halt at any crime to protect himself. No one but Neal Crawford could positively identify him. To the rest of the world he was known only as the Hawk. Suppose he also recognized the old man, and guessed Crawford's suspicions? Wouldn't the killing of Neal, the one serious witness against him, be the natural outcome?

Another fact was joined to the significance of the letter. Since receiving that, Temple had read in the papers of a startling bank robbery which at once suggested the Hawk's methods, and the authorities were again deeply concerned in discovering that mysterious outlaw's whereabouts.

These reflections were broken into as a horse went loping down the road; one of the ranch hands had started for town. Then Wade reappeared, followed by two cowboys who stared with shocked faces at Crawford's body.

Bret asked them a few questions, but like Wade they had heard nothing till the racket of Temple's arrival.

Soon after dawn, Sheriff Bill Briley arrived with the coroner. Although there apparently had been no robbery, to establish a motive, there was a very grave doubt that Crawford could have fallen in such manner as to inflict the wound upon himself, and the final decision was that he had met death at the hand of a party, or parties, unknown.

Temple kept silence regarding his personal suspicions, which might be but wild imaginings. Should they be true, he would not risk confiding them to a soul, for fear some hint might seep through to the Hawk before Bret secured proof.

"He might make a getaway, he's so damned slick," Temple thought. "I'll tell the authorities when I know a little more."

He discovered a spot where a horse had been tied near the house for some time, and far enough from the bunkhouse to attract no attention from the cowboys. Painstakingly examining the ground, he found but one clear track. In a soft spot of the gravel was the imprint of a medium-sized, narrow boot with a square toe, the type of fancy, light weight boot not worn by cowboys. The perfection of the imprint proved that the boot was in first class condition, the heel unworn. Such footgear might be worn by a man whose jacket would be adorned with fancy buttons like the bit in Temple's pocket.

He accepted the conclusion that a man, not a cowboy, had tied his horse there that night, and it had not been hard to track this animal down the creek to a place where it had been turned into a clump of willows. This was a probable location for the mysterious rider to have hidden himself when he heard Temple's approach.

The sheriff also made a thorough investigation of the premises, keeping equally silent regarding his conclusions and discoveries. To Bret his last words were, "Don't exactly look like a natural death, but we shall see."

"What sort of a place is Ballarat?" Bret asked Wade casually.

"A ghost mining town across the mountains to the north."

"Ghost town, eh? What's over there?"

"Nothing much," Wade answered. "Tumble down shacks, played-out mines, a few old prospectors still stickin' around, and Gracie Scott—hangin' onto the old Golden Fleece Hotel, waitin' for the boom to come back."

Temple asked nothing further. He now felt certain that the man who had ridden so stealthily down the canyon that night, had not only killed Crawford, but also had come from Ballarat. Such a place would be an ideal hide-out.

The reading of Crawford's will revealed that aside from a few small bequests, Bret had inherited the property. This concrete evidence of regard intensified Temple's determination to clear the mystery of the old man's death and

to avenge the crime, if such it was.

Wade appeared thoroughly reliable, as did the other Ox Bow riders, and the day following the funeral, Temple attended to the more pressing business matters, arranging for a few days' absence. He disclosed to no one his intention of going to Ballarat. And he rode the horse on which he had come to the ranch, to avoid appearing on one bearing the Ox Bow brand.

It was a day's ride over broken country, into rugged hills. And the afternoon was nearing its end when, he rounded a towering black mountain into a narrow valley, surrounded by jagged peaks and steep ridges, with a creek running along one edge.

A double row of ramshackle buildings standing just far enough apart to permit two wagons to pass between them, followed this stream of white water for a hundred yards. Then the buildings dropped from the race, leaving the creek to roar on down the steep gulch that suddenly became steeper at the end of the row of shacks.

The wheels of heavily loaded freight and ore wagons had deeply rutted the narrow street and the ruts were still there, mute evidence of the boom in Ballarat. In spots granite boulders protruded through the black dust a foot or more.

On either side rose a line of steep, short ridges that ended abruptly against a giant mass of granite rearing itself high above timber line to end in peaks bare and stark. These peaks penetrated the blue thirteen thousand feet above sea level. The packed snow drifts filling their deeply wrinkled sides would continue to melt throughout the summer, feeding Burro Creek and keeping it roaring through Ballarat.

The old mine tunnels were around Timberline, but both sides of the little valley were dotted with prospect holes —"gopher holes" the miners called them. The houses and store buildings constructed of green lumber were warped and some already beginning to tumble down.

Shadows were creeping out from the walls enclosing the town, seeming about to smother its last embers of life. But Bret knew if his suspicions were true, the ghostly aspect of the place concealed a very live peril. Perhaps no more desperate outlaw lived than the Hawk. His record showed that there was no limit to his ruthlessness. Should Ballarat prove to be his hiding place, the moment he learned Temple's connection with the Ox Bow and Neal Crawford, the Hawk's deadly enmity would be aroused. This grave risk Bret faced with open eyes.

Only one of the buildings was distinctive—a huge, two-story affair with a tower rising from its center. This stood on the side away from the creek —a relic of past, crude lavishness. Above the long porch was a bleached and weather-worn sign, the dim letters introducing: *The Golden Fleece Hotel.*

No one was visible and an air of desertion pervaded the premises. But when Bret reined in before the steps, he heard voices from the dusky interior beyond the wide entrance doors.

"No! I tell you no!" a girl exclaimed tensely.

"Arline, I won't take that!" came in masculine tones. "You're going to belong to me!"

"Stop! Let me go! Stop—oh!" the girl's voice rose frantically.

Bret sprang from his saddle and across the porch to the threshold of the big lobby. In its center a girl was struggling to break the hold of a man who had one arm tight about her, while the other hand was forcing her rigidly averted face to meet his lips. Ruddy curls had been freed by her struggles and her violet eyes flamed with anger.

Temple leaped forward. A hand shot out to the fellow's collar, swinging him about like a ten-pin, hurling him to the floor. He snatched his gun from the holster as he hit, writhing around to point the muzzle at Bret. But the swift release had spun the girl sidewise, so she now stood between the two men, her slender body a barrier to the shot.

"What's this? What's the matter?" a woman demanded authoritatively from a near-by doorway. Her glance went from Bret to the furious, congested features of the other man.

He answered with a quick assumption of lightness. "Nothing much, Gracie. Just a little misunderstanding," his light blue eyes went to Temple, charged with venom, "that we can settle at some other time," he concluded.

Bret got the deadly enmity, the threat, back of the quiet speech. But his own manner of nonchalant indifference did not alter. He stood as he had since that first quick action on his entrance, a thumb hooked easily in his belt, the other hand relaxed at his side. But his eye missed not a movement of the other man, who walked away with a disdainful shrug and assumed manner of dignity.

At the woman's appearance a veil had seemed to obscure the girl's vivid expressions, though there was still a tenseness in her pose. A similarity of feature indicated that they were mother and daughter, the frosted hair still holding rich gleams like those of the loosened curls the girl now caught up with a deft hand.

"I was wanting to get a room, ma'am," Bret said, sure that he was facing Gracie Scott, owner of the hotel.

There was no friendliness in her eyes, rather an unusual disapproval. He sensed that she regarded the other man as a friend. But she had too long experienced the wildness of life in a mining community to refuse his request for such a reason.

"Ye-es," she assented, going toward a big desk at the foot of the branching staircase.

When she turned, the girl took a step toward him, murmuring, "I want to thank you." There was now a glow in the violet eyes. "And I'm so sorry that you've made an enemy of Byrd Yates on my account!"

"That's nothing," Bret answered, in an equally low tone. "Glad I came along when I did."

With a quick nod she was gone, and he followed Mrs. Scott to the desk. But lightly as he had spoken, he was aware that in his first few moments in Ballarat, he had made an enemy—a bitter one.

CHAPTER II

"The Bad Un"

"I SUPPOSE you're interested in mines," Mrs. Scott said as he signed the register.

"Well," Temple smiled vaguely, "I'm kinda lookin' around, as you might say."

It was regrettable that he had aroused so much attention immediately upon arrival, when the real reason for his presence in Ballarat required such secrecy. During the exchange of these few words, he had the impression that someone was peeping down at him through the balustrade that surrounded the big, open stairwell on the second floor.

However, when he had taken his key and mounted the steps, he could see no one though he caught a soft sound like the closing of a door. The upper hall was deserted, the side passages leading into the long wings having an air of dusty desolation.

Bret's room was at the rear corner of the square, main hall, the door nearest the right-hand passage. The interior had the cheerlessness of a rarely used place, though two windows opened from the back. These faced the ridge that cut off a view of the skyline and he saw that a rocky outthrust from this wall came within a few feet of one window.

Temple had a clear thinking mind with balanced judgment. It was natural for him to reason straight to a point and form quick decisions. While he shook the dust from his clothing, washed face and hands and brushed his thick dark hair, he tried to concentrate on the purpose of his presence there. His thoughts obstinately returned to the girl in the lobby. His first glimpse

of her had been like the sudden visioning of a flame in the darkness of night. Her unusual beauty was vivid in his memory, intensifying his antagonism for the man who had been tormenting her.

Bret's fist clenched as he recalled the fellow, whose clothing and sleek grooming were suggestive of the city. In his way he seemed as unusual a type to encounter in the old hotel as had the girl.

No one was about when he went downstairs, but going to the doorway he saw that one of the porch chairs was occupied by a girl. She tilted her head to look mischievously up at him from brown eyes that seemed extraordinarily dark in contrast to the smooth waves of flaxen blond hair above them.

"I'm Eve Layton," she told him. "Now say 'I'm pleased to meet you'!"

Bret answered laughingly. She had the natural manner that sets a man at his ease.

"I guessed I'd like you," she confessed gaily, "when I peeped through the bannisters at you as you arrived. When you showed that slick Byrd Yates a thing or two, I knew you were a regular fellow. And are you the answer to prayer? I'll say you are—a miracle in boots! Do you know, I was about to expire in this dead old place, and become a real ghost."

Bret seated himself. He might learn something useful from this friendly girl. He encouraged her chatter without suspicion of the seriousness beneath the froth.

"Dad left me here while he went over the mountain to look at some mines for a syndicate—he's an engineer, you see. And there's nobody besides me at this horrible old hotel, except Cartie Smith and Byrd Yates. Cartie's always poking off into the hills, and he's sour as vinegar anyhow. You've met Yates!" She giggled. "Why, there isn't anybody else around Ballarat but miners and I'm the lonesomest blonde in the world!"

"Guess we'll hafta do something

ARLINE SCOTT

about that," Temple smiled lightly. Eve was entertaining, her gayety a welcome contrast to the grimness of his mission.

A pink-tipped finger pointed at two overalled fellows who were plodding through the dust past the hotel. One was extremely tall with heavy shoulders and a warped arm. The other was contrastingly small and as they looked up, Bret glimpsed the blue mark of a powder burn on his right cheek. Both had hard, expressionless features.

"There's two of the Ballarat leading lights," Eve said scornfully. "The Clyde brothers. They've leased the old Mule Shoe Mine. Around here they call the big fellow Single-Jack, because he can only use one hand to strike the drill. The other is called Powder Smoke."

"Tough hombres, I'd say," Bret commented, aware that each man had sized him up with a keen, quick glance.

Eve shrugged a pretty shoulder. "Aren't miners always tough and dirty?" she asked. "I wish Dad went around inspecting ranches, instead of mines!" Her mischievous gaze went over Temple's distinctively range clothing. "I think cowboys are a lot more interesting!"

When the supper bell rang, they went into the dining-room together, and Bret took a seat at her side.

"That's Cartie Smith." She indicated a gaunt, hatchet-featured man sitting by himself in a corner.

Bret studied him unobtrusively, noting his thinness and the sharp, light eyes, and remembering that Crawford, in earlier letters, had stressed the slenderness of the outlaw who escaped from the Satsuma Bank, also his penetrating eye. Smith wasn't wearing boots, but he was well dressed and in town clothing.

"He could be the Hawk," Temple thought, "and he's sneaking a look this way every once in a while, but pretending he isn't interested in me."

Arline waited on table with a simplicity and girlish dignity he liked immensely. While she moved about the table, she completely absorbed his attention, and he was oblivious to Eve's watchful glance, the toss of her head as she noted his interest in the other girl.

Eve suddenly claimed his attention, red lips drooping wistfully as she said, "The evenings are just dreadful—no place to go, nobody to talk to. Seems as if I can't endure the time till Dad gets back!"

"It must be hard on the poor kid," Bret thought, adding with a smile, "We'll liven up the evenings a bit."

Eve dimpled. "That's a promise, Mister Cowboy!" she declared.

When they left the dining-room, Bret said, "I'm going out to the stable to take a look at my horse." He meant to know the lay of the premises. A time might come when it would be necessary to secure his mount in a hurry, and without asking aid of anyone else.

Eve ran upstairs, calling over her shoulder, "See you soon, then!"

The dilapidated building close to the ridge at one end of the hotel, had once sheltered relay teams for the stages as well as mounts belonging to patrons of the Golden Fleece. Bret's bay was tied in a stall near the main door, saddle and bridle near.

Glancing along back of the hotel building, Bret saw that the ground rose steadily from the street to the base of the ridge, and it would not be much of a drop from his window to the level. Under the cover of darkness he could easily come out that way, get his horse and ride off without anyone being the wiser.

He turned back to the street, thoughts once more busy with the Hawk. The spring twilight had softened the harsh features of Ballarat, blending the mountain peaks into the deep blue of the evening sky, while the breeze carried a fragrance from the wild flowers of that high country.

Temple walked slowly along the rutted road in the opposite direction from that by which he had entered town. The ramshackle buildings he passed gave no evidence of present occupancy, the only sounds coming from the other end of the street where the few inhabitants of Ballarat seemed to have settled themselves near the shabby store.

He was unaware of a figure that moved along not far behind him, between the irregular row of shacks and the ridge wall at his right. If he halted to glance about him, the form of the other man instantly took cover. As relentless as a bloodhound, as silent as a shadow, it followed.

When Bret's gaze followed the road where it wound away into the gulch beyond the last straggling shack, he saw the bent figure of a man leading a pack burro. As they drew nearer, he heard the old fellow talking to the animal in a thin, cracked voice.

"Well, Sary Bernhardt, we're back in the old town again. But don't you worry none. We'll keep outa the way of the Bad Un'. I'll see that the murderin' devil don't get a chance at you this time!" The voice halted as the pair came abreast of Temple.

"Evening, old-timer," Bret said, noting the twinkling dark eyes that peered at him, squirrel-like, from beneath bristling white brows. The face was a nest of whiskers, with scraggy gray hair spraying from under the battered hat

crown, down over the collar of his faded, flannel shirt.

"Howdye, stranger!" Temple knew he was being weighed on the scale of the old man's judgment.

He laid a hand on the burro's shoulder. "Sturdy animal you have here."

"You betcha!" Warmth came into the cracked voice. "Sary Bernhardt's the prize of all burros."

"Prospecting?" Temple asked.

"Sure am. I'm Gopher Jim. Been goin' out from here for forty years—since long before there was any Ballarat."

Temple turned to walk at his side. "Then I suppose you know everybody around here?"

"Mostly—the good ones and the bad—and some's powerful bad! Was you lookin' for anyone special?"

Bret was reluctant to tell him an outright lie, and the temptation was strong to trust the old prospector in part. As he hesitated a claw-like hand came up.

"Never mind, son. Don't hafta tell me your business, and it ain't always safe."

"That's right. But there's no secret that my name's Bret Temple."

Jim halted. "Temple? Where'd I hear that? Oh, I know. Neal Crawford said someone of that name was comin' to run his Ox Bow Ranch."

"That's me. But you know Neal was killed—murdered."

"Murdered!" Skinny fingers gripped Bret's arm. "What for? Neal was the salt of the earth! He's grubstakin' me—done it when he run across me in Colorow one day, broke—after us not meetin' afore since we was boys. Who murdered him?" The thin voice rose shrilly.

"Wish I knew! Do you know anybody around here that might have had a grudge against him?"

A shrewd light shone from the little eyes. "I see. You come here on the trail of Neal's murderer!" Jim exclaimed. "But he was all for ranchin' and never mixed none with mining folks."

"This looks like a good spot for outlaws to hide and pretend they're miners," Bret suggested.

"Uh-huh, like them Clydes. I knowed soon's I seen 'em, that they couldn't tell a single-jack from a marlin spike. There's other queer ones in Ballarat, too!"

"Who's the murderin' devil you were talking about to Sarah Bernhardt?"

"Him? The Bad Un'?" Jim's jaw muscles bulged angrily. "He ain't doin' no hidin'. He's settin' pretty. But he's turrible, mean enough for anything. He druv me outa the old Golden Fleece Mine when I was only lookin' around a bit on account of Ford Scott's girl, Arline. Her ma thinks there's still pay dirt, but there ain't a grain in there. The Bad Un' went after me like a wild hyena, when he ain't got no more right in there than I have. And he purt' near killed Sary, damn him! I'd sure like to get that devil's skin! Hi, wait!"

Again the skinny hand clutched Bret's arm, fairly shaking him. "I've got it, mebbe! Sometimes I don't think so quick. But now I remember. That day Neal and I was talkin' on the street corner in Colorow, the Bad Un' went past us and Neal grabbed me and asked, 'Know that bird, Jim? They tell me he lives in Ballarat.' I said, 'He does,' and then I give Neal a earful about him. He was awful interested."

"That's him—the man I want!" Bret exclaimed with hardly suppressed excitement. "Who is he? What's his name?"

"Sh! Sh!" Jim whispered, darting a glance over his shoulder into the thick gloom surrounding the cabin before which they had halted. "Somebody's there—might be listenin'—'tain't safe to name no names!" Aloud he added as he drew back, "I don't know, Mister, and I've gotta hurry. The store'll be shuttin' up."

As he brushed past Temple, he muttered, "Come to the shack above the old blacksmith shop, in the mornin'." With surprising agility he legged it on, dragging at the burro's lead rope, and Tem-

ple made no attempt to hold him back.

"Half cracked," Bret thought. "But it looks like he has got the clue to my man. I'll let him cool down a bit, then look him up."

Thoughtfully he rolled a cigarette, but the breeze whisked out the first match flame and the second. Stepping aside he sheltered the light in the doorway of the cabin. At his movement there was a light rustling back in the darkness.

"Pack rat," Bret thought. "That must've been what Gopher Jim heard, poor, scary old devil!"

He drew another match across his boot sole, cupped a hand about the tiny flame and bent his head. As he did so the rotted doorsill gave under his weight, letting him down and slightly deflecting something that came hard and fast through the air at his head. The thump of it sent him into a starred darkness that went black as he fell. He thought the roof had fallen in. Then complete unconsciousness held him.

"I gotcha!" a hard voice exclaimed triumphantly.

The figure of a man, dim in the gloom, emerged from within the shack. As he stooped above Bret's huddled form, grasping a shoulder, steps were audible approaching at a rapid pace.

"Hell!" he muttered, releasing the body which fell back limply.

He darted around the wall of the cabin, his crouching figure lost in the deep gloom along the ridge wall.

CHAPTER III

"I Must Warn Him!"

LORD SCOTT had indulged his fancy to the limit in building the hotel that was named for his famous mine, the Golden Fleece, from which he had made his wealth. The mine had played out with scarcely any warning, and Scott, believing the rich vein could again be picked up, had sunk most of his money back into the mountain.

When an attack of pneumonia ended his life, all that was left for wife and daughter was the elaborate hotel building in the nearly deserted town, high in a gulch of the Rocky Mountains. Gracie Scott never abandoned hope of a return of the old, lavish days of the boom in Ballarat, at which time Ford had brought her there to reign a queen over the Golden Fleece.

When Arline carried the last tray of supper dishes from the dining-room, her mother fairly snatched them from her hands.

"You aren't going to do this sort of thing any longer!" she exclaimed. "We're going to hire a waitress."

"Mother, you know we can't afford to!"

"We can," Gracie contradicted. "Byrd Yates will advance what we need. He'll be glad to. And he knows that Ballarat is going to boom again."

"All right, and when it does, we'll begin to spend money," Arline returned firmly. "Until then, I'll keep my job."

"I promised Byrd you'd stop," Gracie insisted. "He doesn't like to have you waiting on people like a servant—especially rough fellows like that cowpuncher who started trouble this afternoon as soon as he set foot inside the door. You won't admit it, but I know he was impudent to you. Byrd looked mad enough to kill him. And I'd just heard you scream, 'Let me go!' That's what brought me to the lobby."

"Mother! You don't understand," Arline began indignantly. "That cowboy didn't do a thing. He's a gentleman. It was—"

"Don't say another word!" Gracie interrupted. "You're only trying to excuse him. I know it isn't the right thing for you to be working around the hotel. It isn't suitable for the girl who's going to marry Byrd Yates."

"But I'm not going to marry him. I've told him I won't!"

"Yes you will, honey!" Gracie put an arm about the girlish shoulders, speaking with a mixture of affection and imperiousness. "Byrd's the finest man

that's stepped into this town since your father died. He's wildly in love with you. With his backing we'll be ready to meet the boom when it comes—then we'll be at the top of everything and the old Golden Fleece will live again!" Her shadowed eyes below the whitening hair blazed with anticipation.

Arline hated to take away the dreams that meant so much to her mother, yet she knew their futility. And she knew that Yates deliberately played on Gracie's foolish hopes. Arline's straightforward nature recoiled from him, sensing his cruelty and hardness. But it would be impossible to convince her mother of these things. She said merely, "I can't change my mind about marrying Byrd. And we must not borrow a penny from him—not ever!"

Gracie drew away, offended. "Don't be childish. Of course you can change your mind. And we *have* borrowed from him. How do you suppose I paid for those new things for the hotel?"

"Oh!" Arline's eyes darkened stormily and she pressed the red lips into a tight, straight line to force back the words that clamored to burst forth. The sudden knowledge of indebtedness to Yates was intolerable.

"He's been crazy about you since the first time he came here, three years ago, when you were just growing up. It's you who brought him back, and because of you he stays here. Think of all the things he's done for us and how kind he is. Don't let's have any more of this nonsense!"

Gracie turned away with a decisive movement. Arline's lips parted for speech, then closed. Whirling, she hurried from the kitchen, across the dining-room to the lobby, where Eve Layton was moving restlessly about.

A jealous pang added itself to Arline's disturbance, as she saw that since supper the other girl had put on a smart russet and gold outfit that intensified the blond shade of her hair and the velvet darkness of her eyes. It was easy to guess on whose account she had made the change, and for whom she was waiting.

Arline went on into the street. She didn't want to talk to anyone, and particularly she did not want to watch Eve Layton flirting with the cowboy.

The old hotel building smothered Arline. It had come to represent to her only a crumbling monument to past days of splendor. She wished she could go far away where she never need see it again, where mines and everything pertaining to them could be forgotten. The entire town it seemed to her, was peopled with ghosts. Her mother's continual dwelling on past days merely evoked more wraiths to haunt the girl.

Byrd Yates had made the situation worse. Arline had the feeling that the very atmosphere had altered since his coming to Ballarat. Prior to that it had been only a rough, nearly deserted old town. Latterly there had seemed to be something concealed beneath the surface, while insidious, detestable coils tightened about her. Vague doubts and conjectures went swirling through her head like smoke clouds.

EVE LAYTON

She shuddered, remembering how determinedly Yates had seized her that afternoon. His new boldness brought alarm. Then she saw Temple again, springing to her aid, his tall, muscular

body in tan corduroy and buckskin jacket holding such power. The strong, not too regular features came before her eyes—his slow, warm smile. She wished she could talk to him. Just thinking of the way he had thrown Yates aside, had a calming effect.

Two dim figures came hurrying toward her, and she stepped off the road to escape the dust of their passage, thinking as she recognized them, "That's Gopher Jim and Sarah. What a queer old fellow he is, running into town as if he were being chased!"

She went on more quickly, to pass the ramshackle buildings into the more open end of the valley where the rising moon would make a silver glory of Burro Creek, as it went tumbling down the steeper gulch. Arline often watched these moonlit waters, wishing she could follow them down to the open range, where the austere mountain peaks could no longer wall her in with ghosts.

The first, faint glow was appearing. Already the darkness was less dense. And—but what was that? A figure was at the doorless opening to one of the long abandoned cabins not far ahead—a man. He leaped to his feet from a stooping position, to spring around the corner of the building where he was swallowed up in the deeper gloom.

Arline hesitated. What had he been doing there at the threshold that caused him to race away in such seeming panic at the approach of anyone? Impulsively she went closer to the spot from which he had fled.

There was a black blotch on the ground, partly inside the shack—a blotch that had a sinister appearance. She crept nearer, her heart beating fast and faster, then slowing abruptly as a man's awkwardly bent leg and black-booted foot became discernible.

Smothering the cry that rose in her throat, she knelt on the ground, tugging frantically at the limp body that lay partly in deep shadow. She drew the head and shoulders into the moonlight, staring horror stricken at the still features, the brows and lashes jet black against their pallor.

"Bret Temple!" she cried under her breath. "Not dead? Oh, not dead!"

She eased his body into a more comfortable position, gently lowering the head. She searched for a wound. She would have heard shooting, and her exploring hands found no evidence of a knife wound. Now there was a slow throbbing of his heart that brought reassurance that he was alive.

Further investigation discovered a spot on the side of his head where the hair was stickily damp. He had been clubbed.

Springing to her feet Arline raced across the road, down to the edge of the creek where she drenched her handkerchief. Running back, she pressed the dripping bit of linen to his forehead, then to the bruise behind his ear. A slight ripple of movement stirred his body. The dark lashes lifted slowly and he looked up into her anxious eyes.

"You're all right?" she murmured.

"Oh—yes," he said slowly.

She slid an arm under his shoulders as he tried to raise himself. "Go slow. He hit you pretty hard, I'm afraid."

"He hit me?" Bret repeated, the vagueness going from his manner.

"I saw him running away from here. I guess he thought you were dead." Arline's voice was tremulous from the recent fright.

"Why, yes, guess he must have," Temple agreed, a hand going to the rapidly swelling bump behind his ear. He gave her a quick, reassuring smile. "But I'm not dead. I'll be good as new in a minute."

"We'll go right back to the hotel," she said, "and fix that up. Such a wallop can make a lot of trouble."

"That isn't necessary," Bret dismissed her suggestion, adding quickly, "You say you saw the fellow run off? Who was he?"

"I couldn't tell—it was too dark. I only know he wasn't a very tall man."

"I see," Temple said thoughtfully. "Well, I sure am much obliged to you!"

"But I haven't done anything," she demurred. "Please let me put something on your head. Really, I'm an excellent nurse."

"I bet you are. But I don't wanta go back now. Fact is, you can do something for me a lot more important than putting stuff on that bruise—if you wouldn't mention a word about this—don't even tell anyone you saw me. That will be a real favor."

"Of course I won't tell a soul, I promise. But I'm afraid you're in danger . . ." she began impulsively.

"Does kinda seem so." His tone was light. "But don't you worry, Miss Arline. This has been a grand warning. I'll look out for myself. If you'll run along back now, and don't let on you saw a thing. . . ."

"All right." She rose with reluctance, not wanting to leave him, wishing he would say more.

He got to his feet, resting a hand against the cabin wall to steady himself. Arline saw it was a real effort to stand and thrilled to his quiet courage. With a sudden motion his other hand went out to hers, gave it a quick pressure.

"Don't worry. I'm really all right. I'm guessing that if you hadn't come along when you did, that bird would've finished me. And I'm awfully glad it was *you* who found me!"

Bending his head he met her eyes with a quick, trustful look that sent a warm rushing through her veins.

"So am I!" Arline said softly. Then she turned and moved away, resisting the temptation to look back till she had gone some distance. His tall figure was dimly visible against the cabin front.

"He is in danger, and it's connected with what brought him to Ballarat," she thought. "I don't believe that's anything to do with mines, for he's a real cowboy."

She recalled the dimly seen man who had fled into the darkness. But the impression had been too vague—she could fit it to no identity.

As Arline neared the Golden Fleece she saw two men standing on the steps. Recognizing them in the light from the doorway as Cartie Smith and Byrd Yates, she shrank back and waited a moment till they separated, Cartie descending to the street and walking briskly in the opposite direction, Yates entering the hotel.

When she crossed the threshold Yates was at the back of the room, talking to her mother. Eve Layton, perched on the arm of a chair, looked up hopefully, making a grimace of disappointment as she saw Arline.

"I thought you were the cowboy," she said. "He's got a date with me." Her eyes narrowed suspiciously as she noticed the other girl's bright color, the shining of her eyes. "See anything of him?"

"I haven't the least idea where he is," Arline evaded a direct lie.

There was a touch of mockery in Eve's voice. "Maybe not—now," she laughed, "but it's a small place, hard to miss seeing people when you're out. Also, it's moonlight, and he's a darned good looking fellow. What girl would pass up such a chance? Quick work, though, I'd say!"

"You've got a lot of imagination," Arline commented coolly, though sparks appeared in her eyes. "But girls are different, you know. We aren't all alike!" The implication was unmistakable.

"No?" Eve laughed again, not at all offended. "Sisters under the skin, my dear, though our methods may be different." She went to the door to peer frankly up and down the street.

Again came that jealous stab, followed by anger at herself as Arline thought, "How silly! Getting so excited about someone I never saw until this afternoon. But I share a secret with him, something Eve doesn't know a thing about, something that belongs just to us!" That brought a soft glow into her eyes.

This vanished as her mother called, "Arline!"

The summons was obeyed with reluctance. The expression on Yates's smoothly shaven countenance was too

assured. As she neared them this had a double effect. It aroused Arline's antagonism and at the same time stirred alarm.

"I've been telling Byrd how very much we appreciate all his kindness," Gracie said so rapidly it was impossible to interrupt her, "and that you are sorry you were so hasty—that you are going to think over his proposal for a few days. And he's brought me wonderful news: The samples he took from way back in the Golden Fleece Mine look as if he has found the lost vein. He's bringing in an expert next week. And he'll have the old mine bringing in wealth for us again, before we know it!"

"But—" Arline began.

"Your mother is right," Yates cut her off. "And I know that you are glad that she is happy. Life has been pretty hard for her, Arline, while you've been growing up. As for you and I—suppose we forget what is past, and start new again." He smiled, but there was a hardness beneath the smile that deepened her fears. "One of these days I'll ask you for that answer. Meanwhile we're good friends."

Arline's lips parted for a speech but she stopped as something caught her eye when Yates partly turned. Usually immaculate in every detail of his appearance, now a knot of cobwebs clung to his hair just above his collar, one long filament trailing down over the coat. On the upper part of one sleeve was a smirch of brownish dust with a fleck of substance like rotted wood. That was the sort of thing one would pick up in a ruined cabin—like the one where Temple had been struck down.

Instantly came the questions: Had Byrd Yates been the man who fled from the spot? Had he struck that murderous blow at Temple?

"If so," she thought, "it was because of me, that Byrd attacked him. I believe Yates would do anything to a man who humiliated him, as the cowboy did in my presence."

She hardly knew what her mother was saying as she still pondered the question, finally deciding, "It wasn't Yates Bret suspected. I must warn him."

CHAPTER IV

Silent Guns

BRET TEMPLE moved along the narrow street, his mind now thoroughly cleared. He had made a quick decision. He'd see Gopher Jim that night. It was plain that his stay in Ballarat was doomed to be short.

"The Hawk is here, all right," he concluded. "Furthermore he knows who I am and why I am here. I've got to get him quick, before he can get me!"

He made his way past the dilapidated sidewalk platform of the General Merchandise Store. Through the dirty window panes filtered the faint gleam of a coal-oil lamp, too dim even to break the moonlit dusk of the street.

Without encountering anyone, he reached the blacksmith shop, now little more than an open shed. Back of this and a few yards up the slope, he made out a small shack. It was dark, but Sarah Bernhardt was picketed a short distance along the hillside, assuring Temple that he had the right cabin.

Knowing the need for strict economy of those derelicts who eke out existence going "from rock to rock," as Neal Crawford had once said of old, Bret wasn't astonished to find the cabin unlighted. But he was disappointed when there was no answer to his rap on the half open board door.

After a moment he stepped inside, cupping a lighted match as he did so. A stub of candle pinched in the top of a tomato can, was set on a corner of the pole bunk, built against the back wall. Bret lighted the candle and sized up Gopher Jim's layout.

The pack saddle, panniers and scant camp equipment lay in a jumbled heap on the floor. In one corner stood a dented, rusty stove. An empty can case

GOPHER JIM

standing on end, served for a chair, completing the furnishings.

Temple seated himself on this box to wait for Gopher Jim. "Out visiting some old crony, or maybe down at the store," he thought. "I haven't anything to do but wait." Lighting a cigarette he tilted the box against the wall in a more comfortable position.

His head set up a throbbing reminder that Ballarat wasn't a healthy place for anyone on the trail of the Hawk. Anxiety to talk further with Jim, grew as he waited.

The click of a hoof on stone came to his ears faintly as the burro moved about, cropping the mountain grass along the hillside. And the steady beat of tumbling waters filled the gulch with rhythmic murmur.

"There he comes," Bret thought as a sound caused by neither hoof nor restless waters, came to his ears. For a time this was not repeated, then it recurred. Something was stirring stealthily near the rear of the cabin. Temple waited, momentarily expecting the old man to step into the doorway. But when a considerable time elapsed without the appearance of the prospector, he became anxious.

"The Bad Un' has sure put fear into him," Bret reflected. "I should've gone outside, called and told him who I am."

A half hour later, Temple decided his surmise had been correct—seeing the light in the cabin had frightened Jim away. His head was throbbing sharply. He'd go back to the hotel and see what he could do to relieve the pain. The first thing in the morning, he'd look up Gopher Jim.

Blowing out the candle Bret moved quietly down the hillside into the dusty street, which was now completely deserted. When he mounted the steps of the Golden Fleece he could see through the glass upper half of the door, that the big oil lamp suspended from the beamed ceiling of the lobby was still aglow, though no lights shone from other windows. Entering, he discovered Eve Layton curled up in a big chair apparently absorbed in a magazine.

"You still awake?" he exclaimed, somewhat surprised. He'd thought Arline might be about and was vaguely disappointed.

Eve glanced up. "Oh, hello!" Her smile faded as she glimpsed the side of his head. "You've been hurt!"

"Nope."

"Yes you have!" She was on her feet, at his side, where she stretched up to gently turn his head. "There's blood on your neck and ear—Oh!"

"That's nothing. Just took a little tumble and fell all over myself in the dark," he answered lightly.

"It's an awful bump!" Eve insisted, pushing him into the chair she had vacated. "You sit right there and I'm going to fix it up. I've got some marvelous stuff for healing."

To Bret's own surprise, he yielded. An unusual lassitude had taken possession of him, the pain in his head was dizzying. It was nice to settle back in the deep seat of the chair and close his eyes. It seemed no time at all till Eve was back, talking to him in a soothing murmur.

"There, I'll just wash the bump a bit—there's no real cut—it's just that the skin is broken and it's swelled up like an egg."

His senses drugged from weariness

and pain, he did not hear light footfalls in the upper hall. With eyes closed and head turned away, he did not see the girl who came part way down the stairway, halting to draw back in the shadow, nor did he notice a sudden solicitude on Eve's part as, with arm about his neck, she stooped till her cheek almost rested on his. But Eve's brown eyes knew exactly when the other girl appeared, and at what second she turned back up the stairs.

"That does feel lots better," Bret was murmuring gratefully.

"Of course it does," Eve smiled down at him, one hand gently stroking his forehead.

At that instant the night silence was broken by a sharp detonation, a resounding "Boom! Boom!" that echoed and re-echoed between the high walls of the gulch.

"What's that?" Eve gasped, startled into rigid immobility.

"Sounds like an explosion," Bret said, rising quickly and going to the door. Flinging it wide, he listened intently.

Eve came close to his side, leaning against his shoulder as if she were frightened, though her sparkling expression was the opposite of fear.

From the end of town beyond the store came a shout, then others. A mingling of excited cries, though no words were audible.

Bret advanced to the steps. "I'm going to see what it is."

"Me, too!" Eve exclaimed, running after him.

He halted, raising a protesting hand. "You stay here. No telling what's up." There was such command in his manner that she yielded, and he hurried off toward the increasing babel of excitement.

As he joined the handful of curious ones disgorged from the shacks along the way, a voice shouted back to them, "It's Gopher Jim's shack—it's blowed up!"

"The poor old devil!" a man at Temple's elbow exclaimed. "He was always careless with caps 'n' dynamite."

Bret was silent. Suspicion sprung up in his mind. He was remembering the prowler he had heard behind the shack while he waited for Gopher Jim's return. There had been a listener to his early conversation with the old prospector, a listener who had immediately afterward tried to kill Temple. Wasn't this blowing up of the cabin an attempt to also silence Jim by death? These acts were characteristic of the Hawk—ruthless killings, unhesitating murder.

Several men with torches were already looking over the wreckage of the shack when Temple came up. He joined one of them and together they examined the area of splintered timbers and scattered paraphernalia. They could find not a trace of a human body.

"Gopher couldn't 've been here," this man said, "or we'd have found some bits of him at least."

"No, guess he wasn't," Bret answered with inward relief. "He played in luck that time." To himself he added, "And so did I."

For some time he had been aware that two men who hovered at the edge of the curious group, were watching him. One was tall, the other correspondingly short. And though the flickering light of the torches did not reveal their features clearly, Bret recognized them.

"It's those frozen-faced Clyde brothers," he thought. "And they're plenty interested in me." He turned and walked slowly away.

When Temple reached the hotel the big oil burner in the lobby had been extinguished, a bracket lamp on the staircase landing replacing it inadequately. From this a dim light fell on the steps and barely revealed the upper hall.

As he turned the knob of his door, his mind was alert to the situation in which he was involved though his body was heavy, completely tired. Swinging open the door, he stepped over the threshold, closed it. At the same moment, from each side, dim forms sprang on him, upraised weapons sweeping downward. Metal clashed as the gun muzzles crashed together above his

head. Down came the two men with heavy thumps, yanked from their feet by Bret's gripping hands. One gun struck the floor to slide away into the darkness.

A booted toe caught him in the right hip. Flinging himself the other way, Temple kicked back, striking flesh. His left hand lashed out, catching the man on that side against the jaw at the very second he was bringing down his gun. The man slumped back under the edge of the bed. Temple's strong fingers gripped his throat while a knee crushed the wrist of his gun hand against the floor.

Temple's right hand was busy fending off blows from the other side. There was no sound but the rasp of panting breaths, an occasional hoarse grunt.

Bret clawed his gun from the holster but steel-like fingers grabbed his wrist, forcing the muzzle aside. With a swift move, Bret released his grasp of the other man's throat, shifting it to the hair by which he lifted the head, bringing it down hard on the bare boards under the bed. The fellow went limp, the rattle of his half strangled breath subsiding.

Temple brought his left fist around with a quick jab, but his remaining assailant twisted his head aside, still clinging to Bret's gun hand. Struggling to his knees, Bret forced the man slowly backward, while they tore at each other for possession of the gun.

Sweat poured over Temple's brow into his eyes. His breath came heavily. His antagonist had muscles of steel. Gathering all his strength, Bret gave a mighty wrench, at the same time twisting the gun viciously. The grasp of the iron fingers broke. But before Temple could turn the muzzle, a kick broke his hold and the forty-five fell to the floor.

Tearing, clawing, hammering with fists, they fought, back and forth across the room, now up, now down. The dim light from the window was not sufficient to reveal a feature and not a spoken word betrayed a voice. At last Bret got a throat-hold on the second man, forcing him toward the open window where he tried to hold him down against the sill. His furious writhing destroyed Bret's balance and they went through the opening, Temple on top, catching at the casing to retard his fall.

He struck on the balls of his feet, wavered, then caught his balance. The other emitted a hoarse grunt as he hit the ground and there was a rattling of pebbles as he rolled quickly over. Silence followed. Bret moved cautiously to one side, listening intently. After a moment he caught the rasp of a heavily drawn breath. His hand groped, found a piece of rock that he grasped tightly.

After a few seconds' wait there was a scuffling sound at some distance. The other man was escaping. He was undoubtedly familiar with the surroundings. If Temple gave chase there would be a dozen places he could hide, or from which to waylay Bret as he passed.

He remembered the fellow left unconscious in his room. Now that his eyes were accustomed to the darkness, he could distinguish the house wall. And he estimated the distance to his open window. Better get back in and see whom he'd caught.

Loose boulders lay about and it took but a moment to locate one that could be rolled against the house. Stepping on this, he was able to catch hold on the window sill. Entering in this manner was taking a chance that the other man might have aroused, and would attack him. But he took a firm hold and swung up.

With scarcely a sound he was over the sill, flat on the floor beneath the window. As he lifted himself on an elbow, he was aware of a dim light over the room, then that the door into the hall was open. He distinctly remembered closing it and knew at once that the man was gone. Springing up he went to the door, peering out into the shadowy hall. No one was in sight. Not a sound broke the stillness.

"Clean getaway," he thought with disgust. "Both of 'em, dammit!"

Closing the door he sat down to take stock of the situation. He struck no light, not wanting to making a target of himself for a possible shot from the outside.

"They're out to get me, and pronto," he decided. "But they aren't going to fight openly."

He believed he could see the recent scheme, why neither of his assailants had tried to shoot him. A shot would have brought witnesses, probably before they could make a getaway. He was to have been clubbed to death, then his body would have been removed to some place away from the hotel and disposed of in a manner that would have looked as if he met his death at that spot.

At least one of the attackers, he concluded, must be an inmate of the Golden Fleece—and the only male inmates were Byrd Yates and Cartie Smith. Neither man with whom he had fought in the darkness was as tall as himself. Either could have been Yates, or Smith. But one fact was certain—whoever he had throttled must carry on his throat marks of Temple's muscular fingers.

CHAPTER V

Ghost Town Rivalry

ARLINE was wakeful. Added to anxious thoughts inspired by the day's events was the disturbing feeling that someone was stirring about in the hotel. The usual night noises of the old building seemed magnified. Once she crept to her door to peep down the long passage, at the extreme end of which were the rooms occupied by her mother and herself, with that of Eve Layton across the hall. She could see that the light, as usual, burned dimly on the landing, but no one was visible and she no longer heard the disturbing sounds.

She was in the kitchen by the time the woman who came in to help, was building the morning fire. This was some time before Gracie came downstairs. And she was glad of that fact, when a voice called from the dining-room door.

"What's the chance for hot cakes and coffee?"

Arline turned to meet Bret Temple's friendly, boyish smile.

"You may have breakfast now," she answered in an impersonal tone, remembering with a hurt feeling how he had refused her offer to dress the wound on his head, yet had later accepted Eve's services with seeming pleasure.

Her change of manner was noticeable. He gave her an inquiring look, but she evaded his gaze, busying herself at the stove, directing in the same cool voice:

"Go on in and sit down. This'll only take a minute."

"I must warn him about Yates, though," she thought as she piled hot cakes on a plate and poured coffee, carrying both into the dining-room.

"I want to thank you again for last night," he said.

"Oh, don't! I'm afraid what happened was my fault."

"*Your* fault? That's impossible!"

She went on hurriedly, her color coming and going. "It was on my account that you made Byrd Yates angry at you. And when I came back to the hotel, after I left you, I happened to see that he had dust and cobwebs on the back of his head and his coat, just the sort of thing he'd have gotten in that old cabin. He's so particularly neat that it looked suspicious."

"You're borrowing trouble." Bret's tone was light but he looked as if her words had started a significant train of thought. "What happened in the lobby wouldn't supply reason enough for murder."

"You don't know Byrd Yates!" Arline darted a look over her shoulder. "He's really vindictive and cruel. I—I'm afraid of him!" The last words came

in a rush as if forced by the strength of her apprehensions.

Bret nodded. "Guess he's what you say all right—a slick coyote. But don't worry. I know the hombre that slugged me last night didn't do it on your account." His eyes held hers, in which the warm light was now shining, dark-

THE HAWK

ening them to purple. "Known Yates long?"

"Since he came to Ballarat three years ago."

Temple's eyes narrowed. That was the time the outlaw leader made so complete a getaway after the Satsuma Bank murders and robbery.

"I suppose he's interested in mining?"

"He seems so. And he says he has a mine in Idaho. He makes a trip there, once in a while."

"And he hasn't been back long from one of those trips," Bret guessed.

"Not very. How did you know?"

"Like I know lots of things," he replied, the teasing smile masking the gravity of his thoughts. "He's the Hawk," Bret decided to himself. "And it was he who put over that recent bank robbery. No wonder he's on edge at the mere idea of anybody getting on his trail!"

"You're not a mining man, are you?" There was wistfulness in Arline's expression.

"I'm a cowboy, first, last and always, how 'bout that?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, bringing her hands together with a spontaneous gesture. "It must be wonderful to live like that—on the open range—instead of this." She glanced through the window at the ghost town glaring and shabby in the morning sun.

"It is wonderful," he agreed. "There's nothing so fine in the world as the wide range. You'd love it." He leaned toward her, adding in a lower tone, "And see here, don't you go on being afraid of Yates. I have a way of being pretty sure that he's going to stop bothering you."

"Oh! But you mustn't—"

"Mustn't what?" he broke in, laughing to dispel her ready anxiety.

"Arline!" Gracie Scott's voice called imperiously from the kitchen.

The magic of the moment was broken. That call brought the girl quickly back to reality, and she hurried from the dining-room. But something of the joy of Temple's presence remained with her. And recalling the look they had exchanged, brought a glow that spread tinglingly to the tips of her fingers.

"It's bad enough for you to be waiting on common drifters like that," Gracie exclaimed impatiently, "without allowing them to make free, talking to you!"

"He isn't a common drifter!" Arline flared.

"Never mind what he is. Thank God Byrd Yates is our friend, and you don't have to keep on lowering yourself!"

"If you take money from Byrd Yates to pay a waitress," the threat came with stormy vehemence, "I'll—I'll go away from here!"

"Go away? Where to? Don't be a silly child. You'll stay right here and behave yourself in a fitting manner." Gracie's words poured forth. "When I think of the day you were born, of the celebration in Ballarat, the champagne that was poured like water at dinner, to

toast the 'Little Princess of the Golden Fleece'—my daughter—it makes me just wild to look at things now. Well, that little princess isn't going on being a servant. Be still! I won't listen to a word!" With the forceful conclusion, Mrs. Scott bustled into the pantry.

"I won't stay here and have his money paying expenses. I'll find a way to go somehow!" Arline though defiantly.

Never had she been so stirred up. A force outside herself impelled her to revolt. Through the background of her mind moved a vision of Bret Temple, giving her courage even while she held no definite thoughts about him.

The tapping of high heels across the floor took her back to the dining-room. Temple had gone, and Eve Layton was looking speculatively at his vacant place.

"Don't tell me the handsome cowboy has gone already?" she exclaimed with visible vexation. "And me skipping beauty sleep to eat breakfast with him!"

Arline merely nodded.

Eve pursed her lips thoughtfully as she considered the other girl. "Another score for the pretty waitress," she laughed, an edge of malice on her mirth. "Let's see—first he pulls the dashing hero act to stop Byrd from kissing you. Second, you serve him breakfast and send him off with a—smile, shall we say? Hmm! But there's the rest of the day, a long day, ahead of us! And I remember that men are supposed to have a fixed habit of falling in love with their nurses. There's hope! I gave the cowboy some deluxe first aid, last night. And did he like it!" She gave Arline a challenging, slant-eyed look. "I believe I'm just a little ahead in the race. What're you betting?"

"Oh, you're the only entry, so you're sure to win," Arline was composed, smiling coldly.

She resented the other girl's words, her lack of reserve. But Eve merely giggled. Her look betrayed a real interest in Temple, and though this might be but temporary, Arline guessed that Eve might make a considerable effort to win a response from him. Once more came the stab of jealousy. The strange, new feelings that were awakening in her heart were too sweet even to be whispered. To banter with another girl about Temple, who inspired them, was impossible.

Eve shrugged her shoulders as she was left alone with her breakfast. She ate with a hearty appetite, at times glancing toward the kitchen door through which Arline had vanished.

"Yes," she said softly, "I think I'll back myself to win—even against a girl with red hair."

From her handbag she drew a powder compact, in the mirror of which she carefully inspected the smooth waves of fair hair, practicing the wide-eyed look of engaging frankness and pouting the red lips just a trifle.

"You'll do, Eve," she nodded at the reflection. "Now let's go and hunt up the cowboy! He likes you already so the rest'll be easy."

CHAPTER VI

Eavesdropper

TEMPLE had left the hotel, thoughtfully considering Arline's information.

"I knew that Byrd Yates was a low-down coyote the minute I laid eyes on him," he reflected. "But he musta put some suet on his ribs these three years since Crawford first saw him. Cartie Smith's more the size I was lookin' for. And he's got a damned sneakin' look about him, too. It's them, they're the pair that jumped me in my room, last night."

As he walked slowly along the street he glimpsed the big figure of Single-Jack lounging in the doorway of a shack that commanded a view of the Golden Fleece.

"Watchdog," he commented to himself. "Them Clyde brothers are part of the gang, all right. It sure ain't intended I shall get very far away from Ballarat. And I'd guess that my hours

in town ain't likely to be many—alive—unless I step mighty careful!"

He strolled idly toward the scene of the explosion. Nearing the spot, he saw Sarah Bernhardt still picketed on the hillside. That made practically certain that the prospector had not gone far—he wouldn't leave the burro behind. An examination of the ruins in the bright light of morning, had made sure that no human being had perished in the explosion.

Walking around back of the scattered débris, Temple heard a sharp, "Ss! Ss!"

Up went his glance, over a short steep rise to a ledge above the one on which the shack had stood, coming to rest on the boarded-up entrance to an old shaft. Part of the timbers had settled crookedly, leaving a narrow, black aperture that would scarcely be noticed from the road below. From this protruded a hairy face. A claw-like hand came out to point peremptorily at a slab of rock a few feet below the shaft mouth.

"Set down there and don't be lookin' up here, callin' attention to where I'm hid!"

"Hello, Gopher, darned glad to see you," Temple said. "Come on out. You're safe enough, now. There's nobody around. Or I'll come up there."

"Stay where I tell you!" came the shrill half whisper. "I ain't takin' no chances since they tried to blow me to bits. When I was comin' home I seen somebody in my shack—they even made a light inside. So I hid. Great Godfreys! When that bomb busted, I thought sure the Bad Un' had got Sary that time. Then I heard her squealin' and knowed she was safe."

"You were right," Temple broke in. "Somebody was listening to us last night." Seating himself he rolled and lighted a cigarette, smoking while he recounted the two attacks on himself.

"I told you!" Gopher Jim exclaimed triumphantly. "And I been thinkin' over what I know, and some facts I guess, and I'm goin' to tell you right now, so's you can go after that devil 'fore he does any more murderin'. I got no idea what set him on Neal, nor what there was between 'em. But the fellow he pointed out to me in Colorow was the Bad Un'."

"Yes?" Temple prompted. "And who is he?"

"He's that dandy, Byrd Yates."

"I thought so," Bret murmured. Now there was triumph in his voice. "Gopher, I've got proof enough to get an arrest and investigation of my charges. He's one bad hombre, and he's got a gang with him in Ballarat. He'll get me, or get away himself, if I don't move damn quick. If I manage to slip out, he'll beat it before he can be taken. Now, I've got an idea. You can ride my horse and take a message to Sheriff Briley tonight. So long as Sarah's around, they'll think you're near. I'll keep in sight so they can watch me. That'll quiet their suspicions."

Gopher's shrewd suggestions and comments showed that he was not lacking in intelligence and common sense, though his lonely life among the bleak hills, and his constant, fruitless search for a big strike had made of him an odd personality. Temple confided his complete suspicions.

"Yep, I remember hearin' about that Hawk feller," Gopher said, "I ain't around Ballarat much, so's I ain't never seen the Bad Un' mixin' it with Smith nor them Clydes. But them brothers ain't miners, and Cartie's only pretendin' to prospect. When he leaves town, he rides way off. His business ain't in the hills."

They talked for some time, the old man concealed in the shaft entrance, Bret smoking in a seemingly idle manner. Once or twice he glimpsed Single-Jack but the latter made no attempt to approach the hillside. Just knowing Temple's whereabouts was probably all that mattered to him.

"There's an idee glimmerin' around in my head," Gopher finally said. "'bout them fellers and that Mule Shoe Mine. I'll try to work it out 'fore night."

Bret rose, his gaze on the street. "I'll go along now. You be in the hotel stable right after dark. Wait for me I'll come when I get a chance. Savvy?"

There was no reply.

"Gopher!" he called, looking up at the shaft entrance. There was only the blank opening, but he thought he heard a faint, "Sh! Sh!"

"Hello, cowboy!" came suddenly, surprisingly from behind him.

Temple whirled. A few feet away stood Eve Layton, smiling. She had just rounded an upthrust shoulder of rock.

"Why, hello!" he returned, wondering if she had heard anything, and cursing himself for watching only the road below. She had come along the ridge from the direction of the hotel and Gopher's sharp eyes had spied her.

"Thought you were sleeping off your headache," she said. "Oh! For pity's sake, where did you get that long scratch on your cheek, and that extra bump on your jaw?"

"Oh, those didn't show up till this morning, I guess. They don't amount to anything," he said, leading the way down the path to the road.

"Story-teller!" Eve cocked an eyebrow saucily at him. "You've been fighting, maybe settling accounts with Byrd Yates. You need a guardian to keep you from wasting your good looks that way. He's going to marry Arline—no use fighting over her, even if she does get a kick out of it. Some girls aren't satisfied unless they've got a couple of men scrapping about them." She sighed. "But me, I'm content with one pleasant friend, especially if he'd go for a horseback ride with me?" The upward inflection was a direct invitation.

Bret's flash of resentment at her remark concerning Arline subsided when she smiled up at him. Eve had a cute way, combined with an almost childish frankness. She didn't mean any harm. And the poor kid was lonesome. A ride with her would help pass the day, and even the Hawk would hardly strike at him under such conditions.

"Sure, if I'll do for that friend, count me in for a ride early this afternoon."

"Fine!" Eve clapped her hands. "There's a little black in the stable that you can saddle for me."

When they reached the store he left her. Bret wanted to size up the stragglers who hung around there and he meant to spend the morning learning everything possible about the men he suspected of being in the Hawk's gang of outlaws.

She lingered for a last, teasing word. "Be careful you don't take another tumble. You might fall into a prospect hole where you'd do more than bump your head. Plenty of them are deep enough to lose you forever!"

She went on to the hotel. Yates was on the porch, immaculately dressed and freshly shaved, the tight, high collar of his starched shirt seeming to make him carry his head a bit more stiffly than usual.

"Where've you been so early?" he asked.

"Walking—with the cowboy," she answered, glad for the chance to mention Temple which might annoy Yates, whom she had never forgiven for his lack of interest in herself. "We're going for a ride right after dinner," she added.

Yates displayed no interest, in fact his attention wandered from Eve entirely as he watched Single-Jack passing along the road, raising one eyebrow slightly as the other man looked up.

"Isn't 'Gopher' the name of that funny old prospector that owns Sarah Bernhardt?" Eve asked presently.

"Yes—why?" Yates sat back in the chair he had been about to vacate.

"Nothing, only I just heard Temple call somebody he was talking to, by that name."

"Where was that?" Yates seemed only mildly interested.

"Up on the hill back of the blacksmith shop, near an old shaft."

Yates said no more. Presently he rose and went inside the hotel, up the stairs to his room. On the way he passed by a door at the front of the main hall, tapping it lightly with a knuckle. Then he quietly entered his own room, leaving his door unlatched.

He had scarcely seated himself when Cartie Smith slipped stealthily in, cautiously closing the door. He seated himself beside Yates on the bed, and when they spoke it was barely a movement of the lips.

"Damned bungler!" Yates's thin lips formed the words. "Why didn't you make sure Gopher was in his shack before you set off that charge of dynamite?"

"It scared him away, anyhow."

"It did not. He's hiding in one of those holes above there and Temple's been talking to him."

"Hell!"

"You're slipping. You should've killed Temple when you two fell out the window."

"Huh!" Smith's hatchet face went ugly. "How 'bout yourself—telling me you'd done for him, 'fore I went to set the dynamite?"

A deadly look came into Yates's pale eyes. They shone like steel, were as cold as ice.

"Temple's riding after dinner, so he'll be in the stable saddling up then. Tell the boys."

The ugliness of Smith's expression was masked, something like fear peering through.

Yates placed his lips close to the ear next him.

"Understand?" he asked, drawing back and holding Smith's gaze.

"Yes, but—"

"You'll do as I say!"

"O.K."

"And no bungling! He's *got* to be out of the way—without implicating us."

"Yep, boss."

As silently as he had come, Cartie Smith vanished into the hall.

CHAPTER VII

Roped and Gagged

LIKE the hotel, built in the boom days, the horse barn was a huge affair, a long, low structure with many stalls along each side. These faced a wide feed entry that ran the full length of the building, the low walls of the entry comprising the front of the hay manger. A thick layer of dust clung to rafters and stalls with long cobwebs festooned on the walls and trailing downward from the roof. Cracks in roof and walls let in streaks of light, otherwise the building was dark, its board windows and extra doors nailed shut.

Shortly after dinner Bret Temple swung open the wide main door to the barn, making for the saddle room that was closed off at that end of the entry. As he stooped for his saddle, a blanket slammed down over his head. At the same instant his arms were yanked viciously backward and his feet knocked from under him. He went down on his face, smothered by the woolen folds.

Kicking, writhing furiously, he battled to free an arm, to get his gun. But he was in the ruthless grasp of three men, on whom even the desperation of his struggle had no effect.

The blanket was jerked up over his head, but simultaneously sinewy fingers grasped his throat, shutting off his breath. He barely glimpsed a thin-featured face—Cartie Smith's—then a blindfold was drawn over his eyes. A gag was crowded between his teeth and fastened behind his head, while a rope was pulled taut about his body, pinning his arms against his sides and securely binding his legs. This happened with unbelievable rapidity, without a word being spoken.

When he was completely trussed up, his body was lifted and borne along the run-way to what he knew must be the

far end. There it was swung over the partition and dropped into a manger. A man spoke, the first time.

"That'll hold him till dark."

"It'd better!" came vindictively from another. "I'm gettin' damn tired of laying all over this gulch watchin' him! The boss is always concoctin' new ways to do things. Don't see why in hell he wouldn't let us bump him off now, and be done with it."

"You know the Hawk. He won't have no evidence of a crime around Ballarat. And he's got somethin' figgered out," a third man put in. "'Tain't safe to make no mistakes carryin' out his orders." The voices ceased as the sound of their footsteps trailed off along the entry.

Temple lay still, trying to collect his scattered wits and quiet his gasping breath. His heart thudded as if it would burst from his chest, and the gag gave him a strangling sensation.

He stirred, straining at the ropes that held him. But he knew it was futile to try to break or loosen these bonds. They had done a good job. He was completely wrapped from neck to feet, in many coils of rope, drawn so tightly his body felt as stiff as a log

"Till dark," one of his attackers had said. What then? One arm lay tight against his holster. He could feel the gun. Why hadn't they taken that away from him? And why hadn't he been killed outright, as one of the men had questioned? It would have been easy. His mind leaped from one conclusion to another, only one thought clear—he was dealing with an exceedingly cunning outlaw.

That he would eventually be killed was certain. But how? His mind went back to his gun. That held the clue. He was to be killed in some manner which could be made to seem an accident. Then it came to him, as simple as "falling down a well," he thought, only it would be one of those old mine shafts that dotted both slopes. Some of these were a hundred feet or more deep. All of them stood open. The cribbing around the tops had been carried away or had fallen in. That was it.

When it was dark, he would be carried to one of these outlying, deep shafts, unroped and shoved over the edge. If his body ever were found, it would have the appearance of an accident—just as Eve Layton had lightly suggested. Gun and clothing would be intact, not even a bullet hole in the mangled body.

His mind on the diabolical cunning of the plot, it was fully a minute before his brain registered what his ears were hearing. Every nerve vibrated with excitement when he realized that a clear soprano voice was calling his name.

"Hello, cowboy! Bret Temple, hello-o-o!"

It was Eve at the far end of the barn. He was late and she had come to look for him.

With all his might he brought his feet against the sides of the manger, rolling his body violently with the effort. He repeated the movement, trying to space the thumps evenly, so that it might attract her attention. But after a second call, he heard nothing further. The muffled sounds he had been able to make had perhaps not even been audible to her.

In the reaction from hope, panic for the first time sent a chill through his veins. The old barn was rarely visited—the men who left him there counted on that—and there wasn't a chance in a thousand that anyone else would approach it, the entire afternoon.

Unless someone happened to pass by on the outside, whose attention he could attract, he had no way to free himself. When the men came for him, they would keep him bound until the last minute, when his numbed and stiffened muscles wouldn't have time to act, the end would come so quickly.

Once more he essayed a futile attempt to loosen his bonds. There was no slightest yielding of the rope. But his twisting shook off the blindfold,

and he felt less smothered with his eyes free. Also he could see yellowish streaks of light through nearby cracks. That would be a means of estimating the passing of the afternoon.

He lay still, all his forces centered in listening. He heard only the stomping of horses at the far end of the barn, and a few distant street noises. Perspiration poured over his face, drenched his clothing. It was hot in the manger, the air smothering, down in the confined space. Yet at times he felt a decided chill. His moments of panic alternated with waves of courage. Not so easily would he give up hope.

Subconsciously he tightened his muscles. It wasn't possible that he was to go out of life like that. He felt the strong, steady beating of his heart, the throbbing of the arteries in his temples. He was full of vigor—he wouldn't let them kill him! There would be some way, just a second when he would have a chance. He would seize it.

Perhaps Gopher Jim would reach the stable first. Temple refused to abandon hope. But the minutes dragged. His jaws ached from the cramping gag. His tongue was swollen and bruised, lips sore and stiff. In his ears was a roaring, so hard he strained them to catch some sound that would betray the nearness of a possible rescuer.

But the light streaks lost the color of sunshine, and the general gloom of the old barn thickened. The afternoon was waning and he had heard no one since Eve Layton called his name.

The light streaks vanished and even his stout courage was submerged by despair. Frenzy tore at him. Darkness had come. Now the minutes raced by, bringing nearer the return of the outlaws. "Till dark," they'd said. Would Gopher arrive first? If he came near the barn and saw one of them hanging around, the scary old fellow wouldn't come in.

His sensitized perceptions caught a faint creaking sound from the front of the barn. The main door had been swung open. Now there were other small sounds. Then a low humming—a girl, softly singing. The sweet, rich contralto came more clearly as the singer broke into the words of an old song. That voice could only belong to Arline.

His throat worked spasmodically with the vain effort to call out. He writhed his body violently, bringing his booted feet against the manger wall.

Thud-thump! Thud-thump!

Why didn't she stop singing? She couldn't hear him, yet some of the outlaws might hear her and frustrate his last hope for escape. The singing came less clearly. Oh, God! Was Arline going away?

Thud-thump! Thud-thump! Temple twisted and kicked with frenzy.

There was a terrifying silence. Had she gone? His very vitals seemed freezing. Then—was that a light step in the entry or did he imagine it? Wildly he flung himself about, beating the board wall. Feet ran toward him. Arline bent over the partition above him. He could hear her quick breathing.

"Bret! Oh, Bret! Are you hurt bad?"

In a flash she was over the partition, kneeling at his side, soft hands going to his face where they felt the gag, following the ends around to the back of his neck where she tore at the stubborn knot. It seemed a long time before a strand loosened and the gag came free.

The reaction was tremendous. Such a tide of emotion swept Temple that all coherent thought was halted. Only a hoarse, croaking tone issued from his throat. He turned his head to place bruised lips against the silky smoothness of her palm. He felt the splash of a tear on his cheek, as she bent above him, uttering broken words and phrases in a voice vibrant with her own emotion.

"Don't try to talk," she said. "I'll get you a drink of water as soon's I get this rope off." Swiftly she worked, but it took minutes to unwind the coils and undo the knots that confined his

body. Then he could not move. A paralysis from the long retarding of circulation and cramping of muscles gripped him.

"You're all right?" Arline half sobbed, bending his arms gently, chafing his wrists.

"All—right—now," he mumbled, curling his fingers weakly about her hand.

She slipped her other arm about him, lifting him slowly till his head rested against her shoulder. Bret sighed.

"Darling—girl," his words still came slowly, and with effort, but their ardor was unmistakable. Her coming to him in that moment of stress had released a flood tide of love within him.

At that moment but two things held his comprehension—his life had been saved, and he loved the girl who held him so tenderly. He could feel the swift, strong throbbing of her heart beneath his cheek. Slowly his stiffened arm lifted and he drew her face against his.

"Arline, darling. . . ."

"Oh, my dear!" Silence held them. Then she said, a sob in her throat, "I've been worried about you all afternoon. I saw you going toward the barn right after dinner, and thought you were on your way to saddle horses for you and Eve to go riding. When she got impatient and couldn't find you out here, I couldn't imagine where you'd gone. I feared you were in danger—I couldn't stop thinking about last night. But Yates was around the hotel all the time, so I knew he hadn't done anything. When you didn't come to supper, I couldn't stand it—the not knowing. Finally I slipped out to the barn to see if your horse was still there. If I hadn't. . . . Oh, nobody ever comes into this old part of the barn!"

"If you hadn't come, I'd have been dead, in a little while," Temple said solemnly, her words bringing him back to realization of the situation that still held immeasured peril.

He sat erect with difficulty, bending and rubbing arms and legs to stimulate the sluggish movement of the long retarded blood. A painful sensation spread throughout the numbed surface of his body. While he worked to restore his activity, he told her rapidly of the three men who had lain in wait for him, and the subsequent happenings.

"And Yates gave them the orders they carried out," he concluded, going on to confide in her a complete statement of the situation and all events since his arrival in Ballarat.

Arline listened in silence save for a quick catching of breath at some of the disclosures. When he had finished, she exclaimed:

"It's all so. I knew it. Until lately I thought the reason I shrank from Yates was because he pestered me to marry him when I didn't want to. But I'd begun to sense something dreadful about him, something he did his best to hide. You must get out of here at once, before they come back. Get your horse and ride as fast as you can from Ballarat—while they think you're still tied up." In a panic of fear she gripped him with both hands, trying to drag him to his feet.

"Doubt if I could get away," he told her gently. "But I must stop Gopher Jim before he walks into a trap. He'll get word to the sheriff."

"Then you must hide!" Arline broke in. "Men like that will kill you. Oh, I know they will if they can find you. They have a hundred times more motive now! Listen! Someone's coming!"

She clung to him tensely. From the far end of the entry came sounds not made by the stomping of horses. There were low voices. Feet advancing toward them.

"Gawdamighty, it's dark in here! Which manger was it?" The voice rasped irritably.

"Last on the right."

"That's Cartie Smith," Arline whispered.

Already Bret's gun was in his hand. "Get across the entry—quick!" He whispered. "Along the other side!"

CHAPTER VIII

Murder

NOISE of the men's approach covered the rustling as Arline slipped over the partition. She could get out of the barn to safety through the opposite row of stalls. Bret gritted his teeth, praying inwardly that she would be gone before there was any shooting. Should they discover her presence, outlaws as desperate as these would not hesitate at the killing of a girl, if that would buy their own safety.

"It's a good job, getting rid of this bird," one said. "If we hadn't, we'd all have had to beat it away from Ballarat quicker'n hell!"

"But that damn Gopher's still hid out," came in Smith's voice. "I combed all those holes back of his place this afternoon, couldn't find him nowhere at all. Where do you s'pose he must 'a' gone? He left that damn burro behind."

"He won't go far from that burro. We'll get him easy enough."

Bret's eyes were sufficiently accustomed to the gloom to dimly discern the bulk of objects. The men were passing the adjoining stall. He crouched at one end of the manger, gun gripped in his hand.

"Here 'tis!" A man leaned downward through the darkness.

Bret's forty-five crashed on his head, jamming the hat over his eyes.

"Oh! Ugh!" He slumped to the floor before the manger.

"What the hell!"

"Cartie bumped into something! Wait!"

There was a grating sound, then the tiny flare of a match, extinguished in the very instant it flamed.

"Get back! He's loose!"

Bang! Bang!

Bret fired upward at the bulk of a shoulder, springing to the far end of the manger at the instant a bullet tore into the spot he left. Over into the stall he leaped, and on to the next as lead raked the length of the manger behind him. He flattened to the floor, close to the partition, holding further fire for fear of hitting Arline if he aimed at the probable position of the outlaws.

There was a confusion of scrambling, muttered curses. Sharp orders from Smith.

"This way! Don't let him get by!"

Cartie was up and there still were three against Temple. There was small chance to slip by them in the darkness. Would the sound of shots bring outside interference? He remembered what Arline had just said—there really was no one in Ballarat on whom to rely for assistance. No single person whose business it was to uphold the law. This was going to be a fight to the death.

It was impossible to move an inch without betrayal by some rattling of refuse on the floor, or the creak of a loose board. He tried tossing a piece of splinter back at the wall on the opposite side from that to which Arline had fled. Instantly it drew a shot. That gave Bret an idea. Beside him was a loose board. Working at it with great caution, he succeeded in lifting it noiselessly. He came to his feet, raising it high to fling it with all his power back into the corner of the rear stall. It struck the wall, bouncing back and striking the floor with a clatter.

Under cover of the noise, he climbed over into the entry and moved along its center, stooping to keep in the deeper shadow, as tiny threads of moonlight now pentrated the cracks, breaking the denseness of the dark. Gun held before him, finger on trigger, he advanced slowly.

Then, just ahead, he heard the quick intake of a breath. Instantly motionless, he waited. It came again. He raised his forty-five. A bit of the roof, probably loosened by the concussion of the recent firing, fell suddenly, letting in a triangle of light that revealed his

menacing figure, facing that of another man.

"There he is!"

Bang! Bang!

The explosions were deafening. Bret flung himself to the floor and out of the patch of light, firing as he went down. The man before him emitted a gurgling moan. Bullets tore into the floor of the entry, splintering stall partitions. Hot lead stung Bret's cheek in passing. This way, then that, he sprang to escape the relentless hail.

Suddenly, through the roar and crash of that fire, rose a girl's voice in scream after scream, ringing out piercingly from a point above them, echoing, increasing in power—higher—a frenzied summons.

"Help! Hel-l-p! Help!"

The wild cries silenced the guns. Feet raced for the entrance. After these Bret sent his last bullet, hurriedly reloading.

From the hotel came Gracie's terrified call, "Arline! Arline! Where are you? What is it? Byrd! Come quick! Byrd!"

"Where is she" Eve demanded shrilly.

"All right, coming!" Yates shouted.

"Out here. The barn!" Arline called back.

Loud yells came from the street. Arline's desperate cries had roused the town. Feet came racing across the yard. Lights flared at the barn entrance.

"Wait!" Yates ordered sharply. "I'll go first!"

A light advanced, wavering as the lanterns swung in Yates's hand. He came rapidly, Gracie close at his heels, while others could be heard pelting toward the door from the street, to follow them.

"I'm all right," Arline's voice declared, from the shadowed space above. "Look after Bret."

"I'm all right, too," he said, staggering to his feet. Before him lay Cartie Smith, blank eyes staring upward from a livid face, blood oozing from his temple.

"What's this mean?" Yates scowled blackly as he directed the light upward, revealing Arline where she clung precariously to a beam.

"Smith and two other men tried to murder Bret!" she exclaimed.

Her further words were drowned by Gracie's bombardment of questions and the loud exclaiming of those who crowded into the narrow space to stare from the dead Cartie Smith to Temple's swollen and blood-streaked face, then up at Arline, who was swinging herself down to rest toes on a stall partition, from which she sprang to the floor.

Yates's light eyes gleamed between slitted lids, boring into Temple. His hand was on his gun.

"So—it's you, is it? I might have suspected. And it's murder this time." Covering Bret with his own weapon, he commanded authoritatively, "Drop that gun!"

Temple considered but for a second. The outlaw had the drop on him, and Yates would like nothing better than a chance to kill him in front of witnesses, with the excuse of self-defense, if Bret made a single false move.

He permitted the gun to drop from his hands.

Before anyone could move, Arline stooped and picked it up.

"That's right—hand it to me," Yates ordered.

Instead she cocked the weapon, pointing it straight at his head.

"Drop your gun, too!" Her voice was as menacing as his own, as coldly determined.

"Arline! What do you mean? Give Byrd that gun!" Gracie exclaimed with angry amazement.

A wavering, mirthless grin twisted Yates's lips. Arline was accustomed to handling firearms and she was a good shot. Also she was in a dangerous mood. He considered a moment, his features assuming something of their usual indifferent expression.

"All right." Lowering his forty-five, he flipped it easily about, extending it butt first to Gracie. "I think you'd bet-

ter take charge of both guns, for the present." The last words were spoken in a confidential tone, though perfectly audible to the others.

Arline made no move to hand Temple's weapon to her mother. Instead she dropped the hand clasping it, to her side.

"Arline!" Gracie prompted sternly. "Let me have that gun!"

"I'll keep it." Arline's tone was inflexible.

"Now, Temple, let's have the story," Yates said, the authority of his manner more pronounced. "That is, of course, if you care to make a statement at this time."

Bret's glance swept the faces revealed by the wavering lantern light. Its mildness brought no softening of the features or the inimical eyes that met his. Plainly they felt no sympathy for him. He was a man of the range, not even of their own kind. And he had evidently antagonized one who commanded their respect. Yates held a position in Ballarat, by right of old acquaintance, his appearance of possessing wealth acquired by the one thing of interest to them—mining—and the stamp of Gracie Scott's approval. Plainly they accepted without question that Yates should assume charge of the situation in the name of Law and Order.

"Sure, I'll make a statement," Temple drawled, his manner as unruffled as that of Yates. "Smith and two others jumped me early this afternoon, gagged and bound me, threw me in a manger back here, and left me till a few minutes ago when they came to do away with me."

"Likely yarn!" somebody back in the group muttered scornfully. Powder Smoke had just appeared.

"Arline happened to come to the barn, I managed to attract her attention, and she freed me just before they came back and we fought. Two fellows got away."

"Who were they?" Yates demanded.

"I didn't see them—they blindfolded me too quickly. Tonight it was dark." Temple's glance had gone to Arline, warning in his eyes. She must not utter some impulsive accusation.

There was more incredulous muttering from the crowd, bits standing out: "Why didn't they kill him right off?" one asked. "Looks like a tough bird!" and "What's a cowpuncher doin' in Ballarat, anyhow?"

Yates launched into a smooth flow of words that were listened to with respect.

"I don't know anything about this man," he stated, "nor what reason brought him here. And I know nothing of Smith, save that he boarded at the hotel. We have no concern with the private quarrels of these men." Stooping, he took the dead man's weapon from the lax hand, extending it to Gracie Scott after he had examined it. "His gun is empty, so we infer that Smith did his share of the fighting. I'll just send for the sheriff at once, and let him settle the business."

"Good idea!" a man asserted from the front of the group.

"That suits me," Temple agreed.

"How about you, Powder Smoke?" Yates said. "Could you ride for Sheriff Briley?"

"Sure—glad to oblige," came the prompt reply.

"No, *wait!*" Arline broke from her mother's restraining arm. "You don't understand. There were two other men, that got away, and they were trying to *murder* Bret Temple."

"Never mind that," Temple interrupted hurriedly. "They've got away, and nothing can be done about it." Once more his eyes were warning her to silence.

"Girls ain't no business mixin' in men's fights. Stop gabbin' and you go for the sheriff, Powder," a man spoke up. "Ain't that right, Yates?"

Yates nodded assent, adding aloud, "You can take my horse—right up here, third stall from the door." Men stepped aside as Yates moved up the entry with Powder Smoke, his voice

coming back to them clearly: "I'll show you my saddle and bridle."

Arline's eyes sought Bret's anxiously. He stepped to her side, catching her hand with the firm pressure that always encouraged her.

Before he could speak, Gracie interfered, putting a determined arm about her daughter.

"You come into the house. The very idea of your getting involved in this fellow's quarrels. What in the world brought you to the barn at this hour? Let him fight—he's done nothing but make trouble from the minute he came!" Her words poured out in a torrent. Her clasping arm could not be evaded and she fairly swept the girl along with her.

But Arline turned her head and Temple caught the backward glance of anxious, trusting violet eyes.

Temple remained, watching as Smith's body was carried to the saddle room and forming one of the group who stood about Powder Smoke as he saddled and bridled the horse he was to ride.

Not a friendly look came the way of the cowboy, yet he knew if he had power to put over to these men the truth about Yates, they would at once turn on him, the more relentlessly in resentment at his having so thoroughly deceived them.

It had been cunning of Yates to think of despatching one of his gang for the sheriff. That made certain no message would reach Briley. Temple knew he would not be permitted to leave the town. The only hope lay in Gopher's getting out. And that was so slender that Bret Temple scarcely considered it.

The killing of Cartie Smith was going to precipitate an investigation, holding too much risk for the Hawk and his gang to face. They would now be compelled to make a getaway within a short space of time. That was what Yates was playing for, time enough to make his moves.

He was in command of the situation. There was no one to back Temple. He still had to play a lone hand.

"I'll play it to the finish, anyhow," he thought, his determination unbroken. "They haven't got away yet —nor got *me!*"

CHAPTER IX

Captured

ARLINE was gripped by a terrible feeling of helplessness when she accompanied her mother back into the hotel. The finding of Temple had been a shock, the effect of which had been intensified by the information he had given her. She could not doubt his statements. Not her intuition alone vouched for their truth, but now that her eyes were opened she could recall a thousand trifles that afforded verification of a secret understanding between Cartie Smith and Yates. Once she had seen Smith regarding Yates from eyes that held terror. It was easy to believe in the identity of Yates as the Hawk.

She understood as perfectly as did Temple that Powder Smoke was intended to carry no message to the sheriff. And she also guessed that the outlaws would soon make a getaway from Ballarat. Personally she cared very little if they did, if only Bret's safety were insured. The punishment of even such desperate outlaws as the Hawk and his gang was of small importance when balanced in the scales opposite the life of the man she loved.

She also sensed that Temple would not abandon his attempt to secure the capture of Yates, and the perils of the situation had not been removed by the half victory in the barn.

Wasn't there anything she could do? No one whose aid she could enlist?

Gracie's angry outpouring fell on heedless ears. Eve's excited chatter, her repeated questions, made no impression on Arline's comprehension.

It was only the sounds from without

that she heard with understanding. She could follow the progress of events at the barn by the talk that went on, much of it so loudly that she even caught words here and there. A horse was ridden hurriedly from the yard—that must be Powder Smoke.

Arline's gaze was glued to the doorway, watching for Temple to come in. His gun was still clasped in her hand.

Presently there was a flurry of approaching footsteps. Yates's voice was distinguishable. But Temple appeared ahead of him, entering with a quick step. Eve ran up to catch his arm, exclaiming excitedly:

"My goodness, but you livened up the old town! But I didn't ask for battles and murder!"

"I didn't either," he said dryly, dismissing the subject and scarcely noticing her injured expression.

His gaze went to Arline. The strain of her expression relaxed and the glimmer of a smile lifted the corners of her firmly held lips. Yates saw this as he entered, his mouth contracting with a sharp spasm of anger.

"Here is your gun," Arline said, coming to meet Temple. "I only kept it for you. Mr. Yates is right—no one has the authority to claim any man's weapon, nor to interfere with his liberty. Those acts are up to the sheriff."

"Much obliged," Bret smiled, his eyes sending a silent message to hers. "Sure, that's right. Don't you worry. Everything's all right now. We'll just mark time till Sheriff Briley comes, and he'll get here tomorrow." The last words were slightly stressed and were accompanied by a significant look.

Taking advantage of Yates speaking to Gracie, Temple brushed past Arline and whispered, "Gopher will go."

Her shining lashes drooped, then lifted with the effect of an understanding nod.

Gracie had taken two guns from the desk drawer. These she handed to Yates. "Here, you take charge of Smith's gun, too. Officer or no officer, I look to you to keep order on these premises. As owner, I have the right to arrange for whatever protection I see fit."

Yates bowed with deference. "I'm delighted to be of service."

"It isn't the hotel that needs protection," Eve declared. "I think it's Mr. Temple, don't you, Byrd?" There was a teasing smile on her lips and she seemed unaware of the serious undercurrents of the scene.

"He'll be safe enough," Yates answered smoothly, "if he stays in his room."

Temple knew there was a covert threat in that speech.

"Likely so," he agreed. "I'm going right there now, to clean up. Guess I'll call it a day. Good night, everybody!"

His glance passed lightly from one to the other, lingering briefly on Arline. She wanted to talk with him, it seemed as if she must do so. Yet she understood that was impossible. And to force an opportunity would be unwise. She knew he was doing the right thing, to break the tension. Yet her fears arose as he passed from sight up the stairs.

If there was only someone who could ride to the nearest ranch on the road to town. Someone there would bear the message on to Briley. By fast riding the sheriff could be in Ballarat soon after daylight. Arline was sure that Gopher had been terrified by the fight in the barn and that he would never attempt to carry the message, now.

And there was no one else. Yes, there was! She could go herself. Better than anyone else she could slip a horse from the stable, Bret's by choice, for she knew the animal had both speed and stamina. It would bear her light weight fast. She knew the road to Colorow, though she had been over it but once or twice in her life. Yates might be watching Temple, surely would be. But he would have no suspicion of Arline making such an attempt.

Swiftly she planned what she would do. Gracie was busy talking with Yates and Eve, yawning disgustedly, was already climbing the stairs.

Arline followed her, pausing to say to her mother, "I'm going to bed." Gracie nodded. "Yes, dear, go on up."

Arline ignored Yates's glance. As she ran up the stairs she saw a line of light beneath Temple's door. A lump rose in her throat and she blinked back a rush of tears, pausing to form with her lips a silent "Good-by, darling. God keep you!"

Hurrying to her room, she exchanged her dress for a riding outfit, all but the boots which she placed near the door before extinguishing the light. An idea of leaving at once by way of the window was abandoned. Her mother would be certain to discover her absence.

"I must be here to speak to her when she comes up," Arline told herself, every nerve jumping with impatience to be off.

The wait wasn't long. In a few moments Gracie mounted the stairs and Yates's tread could be heard at the same time.

Arline lay on her bed, drawing the covers over her tightly. As she had foreseen, her mother came at once to her door.

"You're not asleep?" she asked.

"No, mother. But please—I don't feel like talking tonight."

"All right, dear." Gracie came across the room to lay her hand gently on Arline's shoulder, the touch producing swift fear. What if she felt the difference of the heavier garment that now took the place of the usual thin night clothing?

"Go to sleep, and try to forget all this nonsense. Briley will be here tomorrow and clear up the fighting, then we can live in peace. Good night!" With a light pat that produced a fresh spasm of fear, Gracie went away.

As soon as her door closed, Arline was out of bed. Getting into the hall was a slower business, such care had to be exerted to prevent the clicking of the latch, yet to make sure it was securely fastened. Every creaking board of the old floor was well known to Arline and it was no trick at all to slip along the hall. Yates was moving about in his room, making noise enough to cover any sound she might make on the stairs.

As she had hoped, the yard was deserted. No one was at the barn and she resolutely forced from her mind thought of what lay in the saddle room. She reached around the door casing for her bridle, then stooped quickly to lift her light saddle and carry it out to the stalls. Then she discovered that Temple's horse was gone. That startled her. Had Yates had it taken away, in case Temple should try to ride out that night? She went right on, saddling a black she found in the barn, without wasting a minute on speculation.

Leaving the barn required caution and she led the horse till they passed the last inhabited cabin. Then she mounted, still going at a slow pace to avoid the noise of rapid hoofbeats in the confined space of the valley. In the wider canyon sounds did not magnify so greatly and would attract no attention in Ballarat.

Her courage rose as the black broke into a lope. The swift movement through the clear night air stimulated her energies, clarified her thoughts and set new hope within her.

"Run, Blackie!" she said, with a touch of the spur.

The animal responded willingly and they raced faster and faster. A rough spot pulled them down a little but this was nearly passed when she was startled and alarmed to see a man spring in front of them. The horse swerved, slowed. In vain she struck with her spurs, but a strong hand had gripped the bridle.

"No, you don't!"

That voice! Arline had last heard it agreeing to bear the message to Briley. Powder Smoke had halted her.

"Let go!" she ordered.

"Hell, if it ain't the girl!" came with deep disgust. "Nothin' doin'. It's my hard luck more'n it's yours, sister, but I've gotta hang onto you."

"Why?"

"It's the boss's orders to stop anybody that rides outa Ballarat tonight!"

"I suppose you mean Byrd Yates told you that," Arline said with deep scorn. "Well, you can't stop a girl this way. Let go my bridle!"

"Nope. I know where you're headed for, and you ain't goin'! Get that? I'm takin' you to the place I was told, and there you'll wait for the boss."

Arline wondered how she had been such a fool as to start on a venture like that without a gun, without even a quirt for a weapon of defense. Vainly she tried to take Powder Smoke unawares and break away. It was useless.

"All right, I'll go back to the Golden Fleece," she conceded.

"Nope. You are going where the boss said to take anybody that started for the sheriff's. Might spoil some of his plans if you was to go ridin' back to the hotel now."

"What do you mean?" His words had stirred a new fear. He refused to answer.

Suddenly Arline recognized her surroundings and when they came to a stop she exclaimed, "Why, this is the Golden Fleece Mine!"

"Sure. Make yourself to home."

They were in front of the old shaft house of her father's mine. A big figure came from the shadows to meet them.

"Damn, who's this?" Single-Jack demanded, cursing with increasing fervor when he discovered Arline's identity.

Powder Smoke cut him off. "It'll only be a little bit till the Hawk'll be along. Gotta hold her till then. You got the horses ready?"

"It'll prob'ly be an hour," was angrily growled. "Yes, everything's fixed. We could be on our way if he didn't have some damn scheme to kill that cowpuncher, before he cuts loose from there."

"Oh!" Arline ejaculated.

The two men laughed raucously.

"Yep," Powder Smoke added, "you won't be there to do no screechin' and spoil it. That bird's done for, sure, this time!"

Arline bit her lips to hold back the futile cry that rose in her throat.

What did they mean? What could Yates do, with Temple in his room, and thoroughly on his guard?

Her brain whirled with awful imaginings. He had tried to blow up Gopher Jim—could it be possible he would try anything like that at the Golden Fleece?

Within her one voice said, "No, that's absurd." Another insisted, "There's no limit to what a mind so distorted by crime will prompt a man to do. The Hawk is no longer human, he's evil, he knows no law and nothing restrains him. Nothing is so awful that he couldn't be guilty of it."

She wished she could lose her senses, if for only a moment. If only she could close her eyes and not see visions of horror inspired by her fearful imaginings. Like hammers, the dreadful thoughts beat upon her brain.

CHAPTER X

"Follow Me!"

BADLY as he needed rest, Temple had not dared relax when he reached his room. Vigilance was imperative. Possibly the Hawk would make no further attack on him if he remained quiet. But was he going to lie back and let that cold-blooded murderer, that ruthless killer of many men, make his escape, without an effort to stop him?

No! Every drop of honest fighting blood in Bret Temple's body cried out against it.

Filling the wash bowl with cold water from the pitcher, Bret drenched his head repeatedly. That took away some of the fever from his bruises and

cleared his mind. Then he examined his gun, twirling the cylinder and making sure it was fully loaded.

During these preparations he heard the two girls come upstairs. And before long Gracie and Yates. The latter moved about in his room, making sufficient noise to be audible to Bret. When this subsided, Temple extinguished his light and softly opened his door, bracing it so he could watch the hall and stairs. He also could see the thread of light along Yates's threshold.

It seemed certain that he would try to make a getaway. It appeared equally certain that he would know Temple would try to block him. But it was impossible to foresee what particular move the Hawk would make.

Temple lost track of the passage of the minutes. Every sense was concentrated on that room with the lighted threshold, his ears strained for the frequently recurring sounds that betrayed not only a presence, but that the occupant was awake and stirring.

A faint tap-tap-tap from the direction of his window did not at first produce any impression on Temple. Then its regular recurrence drew attention, brought him to his feet and across the room. He stooped, as he neared the opening. This might be a decoy.

"Temple!" came in a squeaky whisper. "Temple!"

Up came his head. He looked over the sill with a low, "Gopher!"

"Yep, it's me." The old prospector was standing on the rock Temple had placed against the wall the previous night.

Bret leaned out till the two heads were close together.

"I was workin' my way around to the barn when all hell popped in there. I clumb up on the hill in a hurry and laid low till I seen what was up. I knowed I couldn't do nobody down there no good, and couldn't get head nor tail of what was goin' on. When I did, I kept still till everybody cleared out. Then I come down and snuck your horse out, like you told me to, and I was goin' for Briley. But I had to come back and tell you!"

The old man's excitement grew, his voice rising.

"Take it easy, Gopher, not so loud," Temple said softly. "What's the matter?"

Gopher Jim drew a deep breath. "They've got Arline!"

"Arline? For God's sake? Who's got her? Where?" Bret clutched the skinny shoulder, then relaxed. "She's in the hotel—I saw her a little while ago. You're mistaken, Gopher."

"They've got her, I tell you!" The old man insisted frantically. "I seen Powder Smoke grab her. I knowed he wasn't goin' after no sheriff, but she was, and he knowed it. He was waitin' in that narrow spot, between the bluff and the creek. I was afraid somebody might be watchin' there, so I'd drawed in to size it up a bit. She come tearin' by and Powder stopped her—took her prisoner, I tell you!"

"For God's sake!" Temple felt as if he were going out of his mind.

"Wait!" Gopher clutched his arm. "I follered 'em a ways to see where he took her, and he went straight over to the shaft house at the Golden Fleece Mine. Single-Jack was waitin' there. When I seen they wasn't leavin', I come for you as fast as I could pelt."

"Get another horse and wait for me outside," Bret said.

His brain seemed to work a dozen ways at once. Anxious as he was to race to Arline's aid, he knew that it was unsafe to leave Yates free. He might come right along and take a hand in the fight that was bound to take place in any attempt to rescue the girl.

It was astounding that Powder Smoke should have taken her prisoner. Why hadn't he simply sent her back to the hotel? They were still trying to suppress evidence. Having taken her prisoner at all, they might hold her, for a while at least. Would Powder Smoke have done such a thing without orders from Yates?

These questions repeated themselves

as Temple crossed his room to the door and went softly along the hall to Yates's room.

Turning the knob gently, he suddenly flung the door wide open.

"Drop that gun! Drop it!"

Yates had whirled, hand on his weapon.

He read the deadly intent of Temple's expression, and relaxed his hand, dropping the forty-five to the floor.

"What's the meaning of this, Temple?" he demanded indignantly in a voice that could be heard all over the building. "I demand that you explain yourself. Bursting into my room—pulling a gun on me!"

"You know what it's about, all right. Step back!" Temple was advancing toward the fallen weapon. "The game's up. I know who you are. I came for you, and I've got you."

Yates stood motionless. Only a fool would have taken chances with the look that was in Temple's eyes at that moment.

"What are you doing?" Gracie Scott cried, from the door behind Temple. "Get out of here! Get out of my hotel! Go!"

"You don't understand—" Temple began, not shifting his eyes from Yates.

Wham! A chair came crashing against Temple's gun arm. "I tell you to go!" Gracie fairly screamed. *Wham!* The chair struck again, swinging him off balance.

With a swoop Yates caught up his forty-five and as Gracie brought down the chair again, he leaped from the window.

Grabbing the chair from the excited woman, Temple flung it aside and sprang forward. But she clutched another chair, got in front of him and whirled it about so furiously that by the time he reached the window, a scurry of hoofs leaving the yard told him that Yates had got away.

He turned to face Gracie. "You don't know what you've done. His men have got Arline. Your daughter is in the hands of outlaws. Yates is their leader, and you helped him to escape."

"Oh, my!" Eve exclaimed, staring wide-eyed through the door.

"That's a lie! Arline's in her room!" Gracie denied.

Eve was already running down the hall. "No, she isn't!" she screamed, flying back to meet them.

"See!" Temple said sternly, going to the stairs.

Again Gracie thrust herself before him. "I know better than that. If Arline is not in this house, it's you that's responsible, not Byrd Yates. Now get out of here, and don't you dare come back!"

Before the first sentence passed her lips, Temple had lifted her from his path and bounded down the stairs. The last words followed him as he sprang from the porch to run toward the barn.

Gopher met him in the yard with a shrill yell. "The Bad Un' grabbed my horse away from me and rid off!"

"Where's mine?"

"There—tied in the shadow."

"Get another somewheres and follow me," Temple said as he flung himself into the saddle.

He was gone. Hoofs beating wildly, hard on the trail of the flying hoofs ahead.

CHAPTER XI

In the Tunnel

RECKLESSLY Temple raced along the rutted road and into the still rougher trail to the Golden Fleece Mine. Yates and the two Clydes would be in wait for him, and they would have the advantage of the cover of the shaft house. He must hold them there, till help came. But what of Arline? With her in their power, the entire situation changed. Could he bargain with them, offer them escape from the law if they would release her?

On a particularly rocky spot he had

to pull down. He wasn't sure of the trail, and was glad to hear a quavering shout that told him Gopher was coming. Bret waited, in doubt which way to proceed.

"That's right," the old man panted when he came up. "Tie the horses here. We'll go on afoot and slip up on 'em from the side."

The mine entrance was not within view, but a few steps brought them around a hump of the formation where they could see the bulk of the building. The moonlight fluctuated, at times obscured by the veil of shifting clouds. There was no sign of movement about the mine, save a horse with an empty saddle that came trotting toward them.

"They're not here!" Temple exclaimed. "But that must have been the horse Yates rode."

"It was," Gopher replied. "They've gone back into the mine, to their cache. They'll come out the other way—must have horses waitin' there. Listen! Hear that?" The echo of a voice came to them, weirdly, from the black depths of the Golden Fleece.

"I'm going after them! You ride for the sheriff."

"No!" Gopher clutched Bret's arm. "That mine's got a hundred tunnels, you wouldn't find no one. We'll go 'round and head 'em off. When I was hidin', today, I snuck into the Mule Shoe—I used to work there twenty years ago and I remember a thing or two about its insides—somepin' nobody else around here does. And it's just as I'd suspicioned—them Clyde devils opened the old cross-cut that connected the Mule Shoe and the Golden Fleece, that they made oncet when they needed a circulation of air. There's only a drop of about a twenty-foot stope, and you're in one of Ford Scott's old workin's. I let down a candle but didn't dast go myself. I could see stuff piled in there, and now I know why the Bad Un' chased me outa the Golden Fleece. He was afeard I'd find somepin'."

"Can we get through quick, from the Mule Shoe?"

"Sure, and we'll ride around there."

It was but a short distance, though the mine lay higher up the mountain. Again they tied the horses and Bret detached his rope from the saddle, following Gopher Jim with long strides. They reconnoitered the shaft house. It was deserted. Inside it was pitch black. The slow drip of water came eerily from the underground silence. After a moment's listening, Gopher took a stub of candle from his pocket, lighting it and revealing a tube-like opening into the heart of the mountain.

"There ain't no danger of them hearin' us till we get close to the mouth of the stope," he explained, starting on.

"Wait!" Bret halted him. "Here's where you turn back. Give me the candle and tell me the lay of the tunnel. I want you to go back to the Golden Fleece entrance and make sure they don't get out that way. I see you've got a gun—use it!"

"You'll get lost in there," Gopher objected obstinately.

"Not me!" Bret stepped determinedly before the prospector, who gave way with reluctance. "Directions, quick!"

"Follow this main tunnel, it turns a coupla times. At the third bend put out your light. Take the right fork, it'll be more narrow and it's got a low roof. 'Bout ten feet ahead, you'll hit a jog, and a little ways beyond's the stope hole." This information was given grudgingly. "You'll go astray in them tunnels and the Bad Un'll git you!"

"Not much he won't!" Bret asserted stoutly, stepping off along the uneven floor with decision.

At once he seemed to pass into another world. The light flickering on the damp, streaked walls gave an unnatural effect. There were no sounds save the plop of a loosened pebble or bit of dirt from the roof, or a repetition of the drip of oozing water.

The space was so confined that Temple's own breathing was loud in his ears. It seemed as if his advance must be audible throughout the workings of the old mine, so noisily did even his

carefully placed feet crunch the loose stuff on the floor.

He seemed to be penetrating a vast distance into the mountain. He was smothering. Lungs accustomed to the freely circulating air of the range, eyes trained to overlook vast, sun-lighted spaces, revolted from the underground imprisonment.

At last he came to the third bend and recognized the narrow tunnel described by Gopher. He extinguished the candle, according to directions, and moved on, hand touching the wall. The sensation of being smothered, an almost overwhelming impression that the walls were closing in on him, produced a state of near panic.

And Arline was in a similar, awful place. He shuddered. Held there by the outlaws, she must be wild with terror. And it was in trying to help Temple that she had fallen into their power. God! If he could only go faster! How was it going to be possible to restrain himself from springing into their midst and bearing her away? But he must keep cool. Her very life might be at stake. And her one chance for escape lay in Temple's hands! Was ever so diabolical a situation? Even her mother had not believed in her peril. No one would understand the menace.

Tortured by these thoughts it was a relief to arrive at the bulge in the wall and to see ahead a pale glimmering of light.

They had not gone. He was in time.

Now he fairly crept over the loose rubble, holding his breath. He could hear voices, echo distorting the words to a meaningless jumble.

Not far ahead of him, the floor ended in an opening some three yards across. Up through this came the light and sounds.

Inch by inch, Temple worked his way to the edge of this opening. Bracing his hands on the floor in front of him, he crouched, leaning forward. He was looking down about twenty feet to the bottom of the shaft. The ends of a crude ladder projected a few inches above the floor at his side. From one of these a wire was looped about a snag of rock to hold the ladder firm. This seemed to be in two sections, lashed together in the middle. The top half led down perpendicularly, the lower half of the shaft slanted slightly.

At the foot he could see parcels, the end of a heavy box, a rifle leaning against the wall. Shadows moved about, but their owners were out of the range of sight.

Yates was talking. "I'll open the box, now, and we'll divide the gold—a third for each. We'll have to pack it around to the gulch where Single-Jack left the horses. And we'll leave those Satsuma bonds here. We can't do anything with them."

"O.K.," Powder Smoke's tones came harshly. "But what about the girl?"

"She's going along."

"She is not!"

At these three words from Arline, Temple's heart nearly leaped from his breast.

She was safe. And she had the spirit to fight.

"It's your funeral!" Single-Jack growled. "She ain't goin' a foot on no trail with Powder 'n' me!"

"That's right! Not a foot!" his brother affirmed.

"We're splitting for a while, till things clear," Yates said coldly. "You know where to meet me, and when."

"She'll be your finish!" Powder warned. "Mixin' it with women ain't no good, in our business."

This was ignored and the heavy box was dragged from the wall to a point out of Temple's sight. From the sounds the men had crowded around it. There was a clink of metal. Excited mutterings.

Suddenly Bret was looking down on the top of Arline's head. Sight of the soft, tumbled curls brought a mist to his eyes. She was so near, yet so completely out of his reach!

He extended his hand. From it sped downward a tiny fleck of rock, straight

into the hair that shone so gloriously even in the flickering light. She looked up. He had just a glimpse of the white oval of her face. Had she seem him? Yes. She made a quick gesture. Then she moved to the foot of the ladder. Her foot was on the lowest rung. Could she make it up to him, before the outlaws' attention was drawn?

"Get away from there!"

There was a deadly note in Yates's voice.

Arline climbed faster.

"Damn you!"

Yates flashed into sight, tearing her ruthlessly from the ladder.

Out came Bret's gun from its holster. But he dared not fire—he might hit Arline. She was flung from his view.

"Stay there! And don't move, till I tell you to!"

Bret's nails dug deep into his palms with the effort to restrain himself.

"Better let 'er go on," Powder Smoke advised. "She wouldn't find her way out, but she might break her neck in the dark, and a darned good riddance!" He emitted an ugly laugh.

"You can't make me go a step with you," Arline's voice rang bravely. But she had evidently been moved to some spot well away from the opening.

"No?" Yates's voice was silky. "There's ways of packin' girls any place you wanta take 'em. Fact is, I've got a good one all figured out. You'll go, all right, and I'm hanging on to you till I'm paid for the times you turned me down. Then you can go back and be the Princess of the Golden Fleece!" There was a sneer in his laugh.

"You'd better let me go, before Bret Temple catches up with you!"

"That cow-punchin' fool?" Yates taunted. "He couldn't find his way around a gopher hole!"

"He was smart enough to trail the Hawk—all the way from the Ox Bow. And he frightened you out of your wits. Now he's got you on the run for your life!" Arline's voice rang out spiritedly.

The other men cursed volubly.

Yates said quietly, "And you'll pay for *that*—very soon!"

Temple's heart swelled with pride in her, while fury surged within him, against her captors. His muscles tightened. He seemed to feel the power of ten men. The men were coming out that way. He would get them.

"Carry one of the lanterns," Yates directed crisply, "and go first, Powder. Follow him, Single-Jack, then you, Arline, and I'll come last."

There was a hurried stirring about.

"Are you going, girl, or must I hoist you with a rope?"

"I'll go." There was no yielding in her voice, though she assented.

"Step along, Powder. What're you waiting for? Hey! What are you after?" Angry suspicion shook Yates's voice. "What's that you hid up there?" he demanded. "You trying to double-cross me?"

"Nope. That's just something personal. 'Tain't nothin'!"

"We'll see!"

"Quit! Leggo of me!" Powder's voice rose in fear.

There was a violent scuffling. Oaths. Then a loud cry from Yates, "You've loosened a timber! Brace it, quick!"

A splitting, cracking sound.

"Gawd! She's caving in!"

Raucous yells of terror echoed horribly.

Arline's scream, "Bret! O-oh!"

Then a rumbling roar like pent-up thunder. Darkness. An up-rush of smothering dust. Silence.

"Arline! Arline!" Temple yelled frantically, flinging himself over the top of the ladder, heedless that it swayed insecurely. Frenzy possessed him. Arline was down there. Was her delicate body crushed under tons of fallen rock? Could she have escaped?

The ladder tipped. His foot missed the rung of the lower half, and he went sliding and rolling from there to the level. As he lit, a gasping breath came from his right.

Snatching the candle stub from his pocket, he struck a match. The wick

flared high, then died down. But his first straining glance absorbed the jumbled mass of rock, soil and timbers piled into the entrance of the Golden Fleece tunnel. Beside it lay Byrd Yates, prone on his face, one foot caught under the débris.

CHAPTER XII

"The Game is Mine"

SETTING the candle on the floor and bracing it with a little mound of dirt, Temple got to his feet. With two strides he was at the barrier of débris, standing over Byrd Yates.

The latter raised himself on an elbow, clawing dirt from his eyes and struggling to free his foot. He stopped all movement when he became aware of Bret's presence, staring up with lips drawn back from his teeth, hatred in his eyes.

"You!"

"Yes." Temple's eyes burned from his chalk-white face. "You killed Arline, and now I shall kill you!"

His gun was in his hand, aimed squarely at the man on the floor.

"No!" Yates gasped. "She isn't dead. Listen!" He laid a hand against the fallen rocks and dirt.

"Bret! Bret!" The cry seemed to come from far off, muffled, but still unmistakably Arline's voice.

"Arline!" Temple shouted.

"You can dig her out," Yates said quickly, freeing his foot with a final wrench of the leg.

"Gimme your gun!" Bret gritted, still covering the outlaw. "Butt first! You're going to help dig, damn your soul!"

Yates cowered back as he surrendered his weapon, but his eyes were unwavering.

Again the faint cry came to their ears.

"Yes, Arline! I'm coming! Keep calling so I know where to find you. Can —you—hear?"

"Ye-es!"

"Where was she when the roof caved in?" he asked savagely.

The outlaw pointed toward the left wall of the tunnel. "At the edge. There was a lot of hard rock along there," he explained, "I think it didn't come down. She's probably only walled off by this dirt, and the timbers are protecting her."

Temple had no experience with mines, and only a vague idea of the manner in which tunnels were roofed and braced. But he had a grave foreboding that there might be a second cave-in, once timbers had fallen, possibly loosening others. Their efforts, if not made with care, might precipitate another avalanche that would crush the imprisoned girl.

He jabbed his gun against Yates's ribs.

"See here! You know more about mines than I do. It's up to you not to make any mistake. If we don't get through to Arline, or if we don't find her alive when we do, the minute I know we're too late, I'll kill you, so help me God!"

Yates compressed his lips to a tight line, making no reply.

But he gave the débris a brief survey, and with a few curt directions, set about digging away the barrier in a business-like and capable manner.

"I believe she's in a sort of pocket," he explained. "Close to that wall. It can't be very far in to her, and this stuff isn't piled solid."

"She may smother," Bret groaned.

"Not for many hours," Yates asserted definitely. "Air is seeping through."

Drenched with perspiration, his clothing clung to Temple's body. His eyes stung. He had to pause frequently to wipe away the moisture that blinded him. At spaced intervals he called to Arline. Her cries seemed less frequent, and grew more faint. At moments an insane fury urged him to kill Yates—Yates, who had brought such horror to Arline, whose fault it was that any minute might bring her death.

It was difficult to breathe, down in that confined space, thick dust filling the air, choking their lungs. But they toiled steadily, forcing a way through the rubble. Bret called to her again.

"All right, Bret!" came the wavering call.

Bret could scarcely answer, so tight was his throat at thought of her fine courage when her heart must be filled with terror.

Just as the candle wick burned nearly to the earth, the light almost extinguished, Bret touched the metal frame of a lantern that had been suspended from the ceiling. Carefully he drew it out. The heavy chimney was intact, also the oil tank. The frame was but slightly bent. With a great sense of relief he lighted this. Now he could better see what progress they were making, and they would not be in total darkness while digging through to Arline.

Occasionally he was aware of a vibration of the ground which strongly suggested other cave-ins of the old tunnel. Then, for a moment he had the hallucination that a sweet, fresh breeze blew on his hot face, that he smelled the fragrance of bruised grass and sage, in his ears was the lowing of cattle, the beating of hoofs.

"God, will I ever see the sunshine over the range again? Will I ever ride over open country, with Arline at my side?"

She had told him that she hated Ballarat, hated the thought of mines, and now. . . . He called to her.

"Bret!" came the excited answer. "You're almost here! I see light!"

Frantically he tore at the dirt, shoulder to shoulder with Yates, still hating the outlaw, still watching for any reason to draw his gun. With great caution they pulled aside a wedged timber. Dirt rained over them. But they were peering into a narrow opening, through which Arline's face stared back, her dilated eyes like black pools.

"Easy!" Bret cautioned, tremulous with fear that they might free something that would crush her. "Can you crawl through, if I hold back this log?"

She shook her head. "No, there's one across my lap, and another over my legs. I'm not hurt, but I can't move."

For the moment he forgot Yates, his thought only of her. She was safe! Almost in his arms!

Bracing his shoulder against the timber, shoving it slowly aside, he reached into the cavity where she was huddled.

"When I ease these up," he said, "you must draw yourself out. I don't dare disturb this stuff too much. Yates! Grab the end of that log sticking out, there. Now, lift!"

Arline scrambled to her knees, steadied by Temple's outstretched arms. He lowered the log. She was creeping through the opening when Bret was flung violently against her. They went down, heavily. A hand grabbed Yates's gun from Bret's pocket. Then a weight descended on Temple's body, holding him fast, the jar bringing down a hail of rock fragments and earth that half buried man and girl.

"Good-by!" came a shout from the ladder.

"I'm all right!" Bret panted, as he felt Arline's hands grip his arm. "Hold still. We'll get out."

He heaved and twisted cautiously.

"I know we will," Arline managed to say, though the dirt choked her, and she breathed heavily. "It isn't so bad now I'm not alone!"

A cracking sound came to their ears, a loud cry, a thud on the ground at the shaft foot.

"The ladder came loose," Yates's voice announced coolly. "But I have my gun, and you're covered. Dig yourselves out, and we'll talk it over."

His tone held its familiar, deadly quality.

Bret clasped Arline tightly with his free arm, whispering, "Don't be frightened. We'll make it. He isn't going to hurt us!"

Aloud he said, "Sure, I'm coming out, pronto!"

But it was long minutes before he

made any noticeable progress. His first movements resulted in shifting the timbers which had formed Arline's early protection, bringing down another rain of loose dirt. His legs seemed pinned in a vice. The mass above them was steadily settling. He could see that it was inches nearer the top of Arline's head, almost touching the soft curls.

With a superhuman effort he thrust his body sidewise and upward, forcing against a tremendous, increasing pressure.

"Quick. Out!" he panted.

Arline crawled through the narrow opening, grabbing at the end of a settling timber above Bret's head. He let go, dragging her as he flung himself backward. They lay safe under the shaft opening as the pocket roof collapsed. They were completely walled off from the tunnel of the Golden Fleece, and the spot where they had recently struggled for freedom, lay beneath tons of rock.

"Don't draw!" Yates snarled. "You might possibly get me, but I'd sure kill you!"

Arline's face was buried against Bret's shoulder. He ignored the threat, holding her firmly as she sobbed with the reaction.

"I can't help it—it was so awful! I tried to get away, but they backed into me, and I fell down. The timbers were over me before I could get up. Powder Smoke and Single-Jack were running out the other way—I saw them go down—and they're back under there!" her voice rose hysterically. "The dirt kept dropping through on me and I thought I'd be caught like that!"

"There, there, honey!" Bret tightened his arms, pressing his cheek to hers. "You're all right, now. Forget those fellows—that saves hangin' 'em."

"Yes, forget 'em!" Yates broke in coldly. "They started this cave-in, damn 'em! Drop your gun, Temple. That's the idea. Now you get busy and rig that ladder up. Arline, you sit there, where you can't reach the lantern, and you stay there! One off move from either of you, and I'll fire. The game's mine, this time, and I'm going to make the most of it!"

CHAPTER XIII

"You Win!"

BRET was silent. But the grim lines of mouth and jaw bespoke no yielding. He lifted the two parts of the ladder, examining them with care, then pointed up the shaft opening.

"Can't put this back," he said, "it's broke."

"I said rig that ladder up!" Yates repeated, with sinister quiet.

Bret shrugged. "One support of the upper part broke when you fell. And it tore loose from the wire that held it fast at the top. It's no use, now."

"There's the rope you brought in with you. Bind that broken upright—it'll hold."

"We don't need any ladder," Bret said calmly. "I'll throw a loop over that snag of rock up there, and go up. We can get out that way, easy."

"Fix the ladder," Yates reiterated ominously. "And when it's back in place, you two'll go up ahead, with my gun at your backs. That's the only way you'll leave this place alive, Temple!"

Temple's eyes had narrowed thoughtfully and there was satisfaction in their depths. The instant he looked at Yates, seated near the wall, one side in the shadow, he had sensed an unnaturalness in the attitude.

"He hurt himself when he fell," was his silent decision. "Broke his left arm, or put that shoulder outa joint. He can't climb no rope. But he's still as deadly as a sidewinder, with that gun."

Bret shrugged nonchalantly. "O.K., Mister Hawk. Can't say I'm set on obliging you, but it will be a lot pleasanter way for the lady to climb out."

"You'd better oblige me!" The light eyes glistened between the slitted lids, again reminding Temple of Crawford's

description of the Hawk, and giving a sinister effect to the cold, set features.

He lifted the ladder, putting the broken ends of the upright together. A brief search of the débris around the cave-in, discovered a sizable strip from a split timber. Cutting a piece from his rope, he bound this tightly to the ladder along the break. Not a word was spoken. Arline sat as motionless as a statue, eyes fixed on Yates.

Bret stood the lower half of the fallen ladder against the slope of the wall. Then he said, "I can't brace the upper part well enough to hold it steady. It has to be anchored from above. I'll go up the rope and tie it fast."

He waited quietly while this proposition was carefully considered.

"All right," Yates agreed. "Guess you don't need any warning not to beat it, when you get up there. You'd be leaving Arline in here with me—and you know the consequences of that!"

"I'm not leaving," Bret returned curtly.

Forming a loop, he swung it experimenty a few times. He knew exactly the location of the rock point and his first real cast dropped the loop over it, holding firmly.

Mounting the lower half of the ladder, he balanced the upper part in place, catching the broken wires that had formerly held the two sections together, and twisting them firmly again. He looked down, questioningly.

"Go on up!" Yates ordered.

Bret caught his rope and swung free. Bracing his feet against the perpendicular wall, he walked his way to the top. Then he turned and looked back, drawing up the rope end as he said:

"Have this fixed in a jiffy, Arline. But climb slow, when you come up. It won't be very steady."

Yates looked at the girl, his lips twisting in a smile of triumph. Temple wouldn't leave her, he knew. But she would bear watching. She was dangerous. She might try to pull something thinking Yates would not fire on her.

"It was kinda useful, that time, to have a cowpuncher along," he commented derisively. "Helped us quite a lot. But we won't be needing him much longer, you and me! We'll travel more pleasantly—alone!"

Her face bleached whiter, but her eyes were steady, burning into his.

At the top of the shaft, Bret's hands moved more swiftly with the rope. He knelt by the rock point, calling down to Arline as he worked, his voice filling the space with echoes that masked a light swishing when his arm suddenly shot out over the open space.

Down sped a loop, over the head of the man on the ground, pinning his arms tight against his sides. Yates's gun went off, nearly shattering their ear drums, but the bullet struck the ground to ricochet harmlessly into the wall of débris.

Swiftly taken dallies about the rock, held the lariat taut. Bret flung himself down the ladder, springing to the floor over the last rungs.

Yates writhed with demoniac fury. He kicked savagely at Temple.

"That'll do!" the later said sharply. "Now we'll go. You first, Arline. I'll pull him up. This makes a clean sweep. Briley can dig what further proof he wants out of there—evidence about the Satsuma murders and robbery."

Temple halted suddenly, his gaze going from the outlaw's square-pointed, tightly fitted boots to become riveted on a point low on the front of Yates's suede jacket. Of the lower pair of buttons, the one not in practical use, was broken just beyond the holes through which the thread was sewn. And the lantern light revealed the button's color as dark brown, mottled with yellow.

Bret thrust a hand into his pocket, bringing out the piece of button he had found by Crawford's body. It fitted perfectly into the segment on Yates's jacket. When he saw this, his face became livid.

"You lost this in the room, the night you murdered Neal Crawford," Temple stated grimly. "I found it there a few minutes after you left. Also, the track

of them fancy boots, where you tied your horse! I was sure of it all along, but this is absolute proof!"

Yates was silent. But it was the silence of a jungle beast. Not yet would he admit defeat.

When the three stood in the upper tunnel, Bret further directed, "Take the lantern, Arline, and go ahead again. This bird next. No, I'm not letting you loose from that rope. A taste of it's good for you—get you used to the idea of what's comin', when I turn you over to the law."

Dawn was rosy in the sky when they emerged from the Mule Shoe shaft house. The air was fragrant, still holding the night sweetness. The early breeze touched their faces gently.

Arline gave Bret a radiant smile, then she flung back her head, shining eyes widely opened as she gazed up into the deep blue of the sky. It was as if she tried to absorb all the freshness and wonder of that morning world.

"If I could only go on and on—far away from Ballarat," she murmured, whirling quickly, before Bret could speak. "What do we do next?"

"I've only got one horse, here," he said, turning to Yates. "Where's the bunch Single-Jack hid out for you? Tell me, if you don't wanta walk back to town."

"Around to the right, about a hundred yards, down in a gully," was the curt reply.

Ten minutes later the little cavalcade headed for Ballarat. When they neared the Golden Fleece shaft house, Temple shouted, "Gopher! Gopher Jim!"

"Hi! I'm a-comin'!"

The prospector ran out, gun clasped tightly in his hand, gray hair blowing wildly.

"The Bad Un'!" he yelled, as he caught sight of the waiting group. *"You got 'im!"*

They rode on into town, Temple explaining briefly to Gopher Jim what had happened.

"I'll go for Briley as soon's I see if Sary's all right," the old man volunteered eagerly. "Don't you leave that devil outa your sight after catchin' him! My Godfreys Mighty!"

They were spied as they went toward the hotel, and a man came running with loud shouts that brought others scurrying from the cabins. Gracie Scott ran out on the hotel steps, Eve following.

"Arline! What does this mean!" Gracie demanded. Her eyes flashed to Temple. "You let Byrd Yates go this minute! How dare you tie him up? Didn't I tell you never to come back here?" She gestured peremptorily to the bystanders. "Take a hand, there! Make this fellow release Byrd Yates!"

Mutterings came from the nondescript group who stared with wide eyes.

Bret ignored Gracie, turning coolly in his saddle to face the group.

"You people got off on the wrong foot. This fellow is a notorious outlaw —the Hawk. He's been hiding out here for years, deceiving everybody. Knowing I had discovered him, he was running away. And he was taking Arline Scott with him—his men captured her last night. He is my prisoner. The law is going to deal with him. You keep out of it. Understand?"

Yates still held his head high, scorn on his tight lips, but something was at last missing from the cold deadliness of the eyes. From their depths now peeped fear. The gathering crowd sensed this. Bret's decisive words had raised doubt. Gopher's excited outpouring, as he shoved his way among them, caught attention.

Temple turned to Gracie Scott. "You've made a grave mistake, ma'am, for which your daughter has paid plenty."

"Of all the impudence!" she murmured angrily. This public blow to her pride, and from a man she had scorned, was almost unendurable, no matter how right he was.

But there was real concern in her eyes when she looked at Arline.

The girl put her arm about her mother's shoulder, whispering, "We'll forget all about it. Now give Bret the

key to the store cellar, so he can lock Yates in."

Holding herself proudly erect, head high, Gracie led the way inside, Bret and a few of the men following with the prisoner.

Eve came close to Arline and said, "You win." Her eyebrows formed a disdainful arch. "I gave up. Doesn't make any appeal to me to fight for a man. It's up to them to do the fighting—for me!"

Arline smiled. "He did," she said simply, adding, with pity in her eyes for the other girl, "You don't know what it means to fight for, and with, a man you really love and who loves you."

Eve moved away, her color heightened, though she lifted a pretty shoulder, scornfully.

Arline went into the dim lobby, pausing as if she could not bear to penetrate further into the house that held for her so many ghostly shadows.

Temple's approaching steps brought the light into her eyes. He took her into his arms, and his love told him exactly the words to speak.

"You're going away from Ballarat—back to the Ox Bow—with me!"

"Oh, Bret, am I?" She nestled against his heart. "Aren't you a marvelous cowboy!"

"Sure, I am," he laughed. "Here! I'll show you!"

Coming in the next issue

She Wasn't a Lady

A novelette about a girl who just couldn't be a clinging vine.

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Half a Chance

By L. Lindley Mulkey

The sheriff of the rough cow-town had to protect this blue-eyed Eastern girl—even when she ran away with the man he was gunning.

THE LONG train rumbled down the grade into Bryce Canyon and lined out on a straight-away. High hills on either side flashed past like phantom shapes in the gathering dusk. Winifred Froman, seated beside a window in the last coach, strained dark-lashed blue eyes for a first glimpse of the stars. All day they had been traveling through a land of barren hills. Now and then she had caught sight of feeding herds, or the slow whirl of a windmill across the rolling range. So this was the West, the land of cattle and fast riding cowboys, the land of chivalry and an almost forgotten courage among men! Winifred had read of it, had caught eagerly at its movement and romance. Perhaps that was why she had answered that advertisement in the *Cleveland Chronicle* five days ago.

"Dreaming again?"

The soft voice from behind caused Winifred to turn. A tall man, clad in immaculate tweeds, stood beside her. Young, he was, not more than thirty, with a narrow jaw and dark close set eyes.

Winifred flushed. "I thought you had gone to the smoking car, Mr. Greer."

"Did you think it or merely wish I had?" chuckled Douglas Greer, dropping into the seat beside her. "But tell me, are all young lady traveling companions as pretty as you?"

"You're being polite, Mr. Greer. Of course the advertisement said 'traveling companion,' but even you must know that I'm nothing more than your sister's maid. I'm afraid she wouldn't approve of her brother—"

"Must she know?" queried the other softly. "But come, you haven't answered my first question."

Winifred bit her lips, trying to swallow her instinctive dislike for this man. When sheer nausea of city traffic and streets had prompted her to take this job of traveling companion to Alicia Greer, Winifred had not guessed that anyone else would be in the party. And then, just as the train pulled out of the station, Douglas Greer had appeared. At first he had stayed in the seclusion of his private compartment, but once the prairies of Nebraska rolled into view, he came forth, an undisguised interest lighting up his dark eyes at sight of the girl his sister had employed.

"I like the way your bronze hair curls above your ears," Greer whispered.

"Please, if you must sit here, let's talk of something more interesting to both of us."

"There isn't any subject more interesting to me." Greer leaned close, face flushed. "I'm crazy about you and, damn it, girl, you're an iceberg! But I'll change that one of these days."

"You're taking a lot for granted, aren't you?"

"Maybe so, but I don't often overplay my hand. Just remember that, my girl." The man's lips had settled in a thin, cruel line. Then abruptly he softened. "It might be that business'll interfere with my trip. In case it does, I want you to have my picture. Promise me you'll look at it now and then. Maybe it'll melt some of the ice around your heart, baby."

He slipped a small photograph into Winifred's unwilling hand. She was about to give it back, when suddenly the door at the end of the car opened and a slim blond woman entered. There was a petulant discontent about Alicia Greer's scarlet lips, a quick suspicion in her hard hazel eyes. Winifred thrust the picture into her handbag. Anything was better than arousing Alicia Greer's trigger temper.

"Oh, there you are, Doug! I might have known it! I thought you said you were going to the smoker!"

"Just on my way, Alicia. I merely stopped to lower Miss Froman's window."

Green flames leaped in Alicia Greer's eyes. "Well, now that it's closed, there's nothing further to keep you. Come, we'll have a cigarette on the observation platform."

Douglas Greer followed his sister toward the back of the car. At that same moment some force outside herself caused Winifred to turn. At the door Alicia had also turned. The glances of the two met in one swift revealing glance. The cold hate in Alicia Greer's eyes sent a lightning chill through Winifred's slender form.

The westbound train plunged onward through the dusk. A conductor came in and lighted the swinging overhead lamps, turning the windows suddenly opaque and shutting out all view of the hills. Winifred's lovely face was reflected as in a mirror: Bronze hair, softly curving lips, the dreams of youth in deep blue eyes. Her relief at Douglas Greer's departure was equaled only by her anger at being placed in a false position. Alicia was patently furious at the attention Douglas Greer was paying her maid. Winifred hated that word "maid." Yet, once they were started on their journey, Alicia had made it plain that the position of traveling companion which she had advertised, was really that of personal maid. It seemed to satisfy some shallow

vanity within her to have a younger, prettier girl run her errands, brush her hair, and do all the other petty tasks contingent on the trip.

"But I could swallow that," shrugged Winifred. "I'd do it again for a glimpse of this wonderful West. But Douglas Greer. . . .

"Winifred!" Alicia's sharp voice broke into the girl's reflections. "We're pulling into a little town. I want you to get off and buy me a couple of magazines."

"Of course." Winifred rose, slim and straight in dark blue suit, her hair a bronze glory in the lamplight. "But will there be time?"

"Yes. The conductor said a fifteen-minute stop." Alicia swung about, making her way back toward the observation car.

As Winifred descended the car steps, a fragrant sage-scented breeze whipped her face. She drew a deep breath, feeling the sheer freedom of limitless miles of range. The little station was dark, but directly ahead lay a dimly lighted street. Somewhere along its uneven sidewalks, she'd surely find a magazine stand or drug-store.

From an open doorway came a burst of brazen music, followed by a woman's shrill laugh. At hitch-racks along the street stood saddled horses, sweat stained and caked with dust. The smell of dust was in the air, a musty, acrid odor that stung the nostrils and conjured visions of endless trails. Winifred entered a small store and chose a couple of dog-eared magazines from a dusty rack. The man at the counter eyed her with open curiosity.

"Stranger, ain't ye, Miss?"

"Why, yes. That is, I just stopped off—" The shrill whistle of a train cut her words short. "Never mind the change," she said quickly, "I'll have to hurry. . . ."

"You mean you're aimin' to go on that there train?"

"Yes, I—"

"You're too late, Miss. That train's crossin' the river right now. Only a five-minute stop to throw off the mail is all the night train ever makes. Reckoned you knowed that."

For a moment Winifred stared at the man in stricken silence. "No, I didn't know," she spoke dully.

Suddenly she turned, hurrying out the door. A whistle dying in the distance, the final blink of a green lamp around a bend, blasted her last hope. Understanding swept her like a flood of light. Alicia Greer had done this! Alicia had known the train would stop for only a few minutes. Alicia had deliberately stranded her in this little out-of-the-way place.

All that Winifred owned in the world, all but the clothes on her back, was on that train speeding into the night. Alone, in a rowdy cattle town, and not more than a few scattered coins in her purse. A chill fear crept through her heart. The West suddenly looked vastly different, plunged into the middle of it, penniless, than it had from the safety of a Pullman window. Well, at least she could return the magazines to the store and ask for her money back. She'd need it.

Winifred turned, retracing her steps. But in that moment there sounded a wild clatter of hoofs. Crash! A burst of gun-fire rocketed between bare-faced buildings. There was a scurry of feet, then shouts. The street emptied as if swept by a giant wind. Winifred stood transfixed, her eyes wide pools of terror. Again gun-fire awoke and little puddles of dust rose in the street.

Then suddenly down the middle of the street raced three mounted men, guns blazing. Winifred felt herself clutched from behind. Firm hands dragged her back into a corner formed by two buildings.

"Don't you know enough to get out of line?"

A shielding body crushed against her. She looked up, past wide leather-covered shoulders, a brown column of throat, and on to rigid jaws and blazing gray eyes. A gun in her protector's hand suddenly spurted fire. And then,

as suddenly, was still. Silence also had claimed the street, with only a drum of hoofs dying in the distance.

The man in front of Winifred turned and she saw the silver star on his breast.

"Well, that's that!" he said bitterly. "Three hombres I've been laying for six months get away because you stood there like a scared rabbit square in the line of fire!"

In that moment a swift anger swept the girl. "Is this the way you greet all newcomers to your town?" she asked icily.

"It's all according. Some we shoot on sight, and others," a mirthless chuckle broke the words, "we welcome with open arms. If you—"

Winifred didn't hear the rest. The reaction of the past few minutes had been too much. A swirling blackness threatened to envelop her. She fought against it, hating this man.

"Here! Don't faint on me!"

She felt herself falling, then suddenly knew no more.

WHEN Winifred returned to consciousness, it seemed she was being borne on wave after wave of darkness. Then, as if from an interminable distance, the man from whom she had bought the magazines spoke.

"She's right pretty, Sheriff."

"Yes—pretty! They're all pretty that come to Sundown!"

At sound of that bitter voice, anger again beat its way through her slender form.

"But she's different, Sheriff. She got off the west-bound train to buy magazines and it went on without her."

"Huh! Well, that's my hard luck. If it hadn't been for her, I'd have nailed that crew tonight."

Winifred jerked to a sitting position. Blazing blue eyes lifted to the man who had saved her a few moments before. Young, he was, with a sort of virile hardness and pride.

"Don't let me bother you further, Mr.—er . . . ."

"Kenneday, Ross Kenneday."

Winifred's cheeks burned. "I'm all right now, Sheriff Kenneday. And thanks for saving my life—if you really did save it. Don't let me keep you from your civic duties any longer."

A quick humor tugged at the man's lips. "One of those duties might be to ask where you intend to spend the night."

"I can't see that it concerns you," retorted Winifred. "But I suppose there's a hotel I can go to."

"There is not. Nothing except the Benson House."

"But surely there's some woman who might have a room to rent."

"This is a cattle town, Miss. The toughest cattle town west of the Mississippi. There's no women here, except the girls over at the Benson House. They're scarcely your kind."

Again Winifred's cheeks blazed. She opened her handbag and drew out a handkerchief. In that moment the picture of Douglas Greer slipped out and fell to the floor. The young sheriff quickly retrieved it. For a long moment he appraised Douglas Greer's dark face with narrowed eyes.

"Friend of yours?" he asked softly.

"It is." She felt a perverse satisfaction in the declaration. A moment longer the young officer studied the picture, then handed it back.

"We still haven't settled where you're going to stay."

"Whyn't you take her out to your ranch, Ross?" asked the proprietor of the store.

"I was just thinking of that."

"But surely—"

"It's either that or jail, Miss," clipped the young sheriff. "You can take your choice."

Winifred was about to make further objection when she thought of the meager eighty-five cents which her purse contained. Though it galled her to accept Ross Kenneday's hospitality, the star on his breast was at least a symbol

of law and order. Anything was better than risking another experience in that bullet-swept street outside.

"Well, let's get going." Ross Kenneday turned abruptly toward the door. "I'll round up another horse."

Never would Winifred Froman forget that ride out to the Flying K. A huge moon rose over distant peaks, silvering hill and valley. Far off across the range came the wavering cry of a coyote, lifting and falling with the wind. It was a desolate, lonely sound, like that of a lost soul in a void of space.

Winifred shivered and guided her mount closer to that of her companion. Ross Kenneday rode in silence, a wide Stetson shadowing his face. In spite of her antagonism, Winifred noted the easy swing of his shoulders, the latent strength in long flat thighs. There was something about the man as wild and untamed as the endless sweep of hills.

"There's another westbound train tomorrow afternoon," Kenneday spoke. "Reckon you'll want to take that."

"I'm afraid not," returned the girl, pride rebelling at any explanation of her status with the Greers. "You see, I haven't money for a ticket. I'll have to find work. Perhaps in Sundown. . . ."

"You stay away from Sundown. I'll give you money for a ticket."

"No, thanks! I've accepted too many favors from you already!"

"Then I'll give you a job."

"A job?"

"Cooking on the Flying K. That is, if you know how to cook!"

"I'll cook!" Winifred said through close-pressed lips. "At least until I've earned enough for railway fare." She couldn't know the picture she made, firm little chin lifted, blue eyes shooting sparks, her hair a bronze halo that caught the moon's bright beams.

Twenty minutes later they stopped before a low ranch house, set in a tiny cove of the hills. No lights showed about the place and only shadowy outlines denoted the presence of other buildings. For a long moment Ross Kenneday stood looking down at Winifred. Then he took a key from his pocket and handed it to her.

"At least you can lock your door," he said coldly. "Which is more than you could have done in Sundown."

Winifred swallowed, hating him. "But you—"

"I'll go down and bunk with Barney, my one ranch hand. There's just the two of us. And you'll have nothing to fear from Barney. He's an inveterate woman-hater."

Abruptly he turned, disappearing down the shadowy path. "And you're one, too!" whispered Winifred furiously, staring after him.

THE FLYING K was a small spread, located half-way between the towns of Wagontire and Sundown. Ross Kenneday operated it as a sideline to his sheriff's job, figuring that it was there to fall back on when the time came to hand over his star to someone else.

The second day after Winifred Froman's advent on the Flying K, Kenneday roped a horse from the corral and prepared to ride to Sundown. Barney Hooper, grizzled old cow-hand, stood at the gate and watched his employer with faded, speculative eyes. His face was wrinkled as old parchment, his legs bowed by countless years in the saddle. Leather bat-wing chaps and faded flannel shirt garbed his stringy frame.

"Probably won't be back till late," Sheriff Kenneday spoke, as he swung into the saddle. "I'm playin' a hunch on those bank bandits that've been cleanin' the cattle towns lately."

"You mean them fellers that held up the Stratton bank?"

"Yes, and the one at Wagontire three nights ago." Kenneday adjusted his heavy holster to an easier position about slim hips. "Turn those yearlings into the lower pasture, Barney, then stick close till I get back."

"What I can't understand, Ross, is why you ever brung that gal out here," complained Barney Hooper. "I've told you many a time about that widdy down in the Panhandle that—"

"I've got my reasons." Ross Kenneday suddenly grinned. "Maybe it's because I was plumb fed up on your pancakes, Barney. As a cook you're a right good cowhand."

"Heck, I—"

"Better be careful! That little copper-head might put strychnine in your biscuits!" And then Ross Kenneday was gone, pounding out the Flying K gate and on to the Sundown trail.

Barney Hooper spat disgustedly. "Women! And Ross deliberately puttin' his head in a noose! He cain't tell me—" The old waddy stopped, a sudden light dawning in faded eyes. "Hmm, I wonder. . . ."

Winifred Froman had found that cooking in the Flying K kitchen was far different than working as stenographer in a big realty office. Burned hands, blistered cheeks, a sore and aching back, were utter torture. Yet some steel within the girl made her go on. She'd show Ross Kenneday! Memory of the latter's high-handed arrogance made her seethe. Accept charity from him? Never! She'd earn every cent to pay her fare out of this wild, untamed country. And she had thought it romantic and its men chivalrous!

Winifred pinned back bronze curls and attacked a pan of potatoes with savage purpose. The paring knife slipped and cut a jagged line along one small thumb. But she scarcely noticed the pain in the fury of her thoughts. One thing for which she could be thankful was that Ross Kenneday's sheriff duties called him away a large part of the time. And those days when he was home were filled with the lightning of her hate. More than once Winifred had watched from the window, while Kenneday tamed some range horse in the Flying K corrals, riding the animal to a stand-still with that cool smile on his lips.

"It's the way he treats everything weaker than himself!" she whispered hotly. "The mailed fist!"

A step on the porch caused the girl's heart to race. But it was only old Barney coming in, his face an unreadable mask.

"Reckon you won't have to count on the boss for dinner."

"I suppose he's gone swaggering into Wagontire or Sundown in his official capacity. Does he have the same reputation of being a woman-hater that you have?" Winifred knew she was being catty but couldn't resist a lesser target since Kenneday himself was absent.

"Woman-hater?" old Barney observed dryly, as he sat down to the table. "Wal, now, I don't know about that. Plenty of gals have liked Ross but he don't seem to have much time for any but Trixie."

"Trixie?" Sheer surprise spun Winifred about. "You mean he's engaged?"

"Wal, now, I don't rightly know as you'd call it that, but I've heard him call her sweetheart more'n once." Barney helped himself to a biscuit and buttered it with speculative eyes. "You see, Trixie and Ross sort of growed up together."

"Oh, neighbors." For one whirling moment Winifred had thought that Trixie might be one of those girls in Sundown.

"Yeah, she's a cute little trick. Away right now on rodeo circuit. Back some time next month, I reckon. Ross cain't hardly wait."

A smothered beat began in Winifred's throat. So Ross Kenneday was in love with this rodeo performer! No doubt he considered her, Winifred Froman, just so much excess baggage until Trixie's return!

"You'll like Trix. Everybody does," finished old Barney blandly.

"Is that so!" thought Winifred. Then aloud: "I suppose she's pretty?"

"Pretty! You bet she is! Dark-like and with big brown eyes. Cute little feet too, no bigger'n a minute. Ross, he's always buyin' her knick-knacks."

Barney was visibly expanding under the effect of prune pie and hot coffee. "Yeah, Trixie stepped out with a new fur coat not long ago—soft, you know, somethin' like beaver. Mighty becomin'."

"Really!" choked Winifred, busy at the stove. "I'm not interested in Mr. Kenneday's love affairs. Will you have more coffee?"

"Hmm, don't care if I do. It's improvin', gal. Most as good as I can make myself!"

It was not until early evening that Ross Kenneday returned to the Flying K. Winifred watched him ride through the gate with a queer mixture of emotions. Kenneday's range attire set off his lean height in a way that some girls might find glamorous. What must this girl, Trixie, be like to have won the love of such a man?

Ten minutes later, Kenneday entered the kitchen door and stood regarding Winifred with quizzical gray eyes. "There's a moon coming up over old Baldy and I have to see about some cattle back on the west range. Perhaps you'd like to ride along."

The invitation was a peace offering, but for some reason it stung her as nothing else had done.

"No, thanks! I'd rather wither and die here in this house than ride with you!"

In that moment Ross Kenneday turned as white as if she had struck him. His eyes were like gray magnets as he stared at the girl. It was almost as if he were seeing her for the first time. Then suddenly he jerked about and plunged out the door. A moment later the drum of his horse's hoofs drifted back from the Sundown trail.

DAYS passed on the Flying K with slow monotony. Winifred counted them off on a calendar that hung beside the kitchen door. Six, seven, eight. When she had stayed two weeks she would have earned enough to pay her fare to Stanton, a fair-sized town to the east where she might get stenographic work. What a fool she had been ever to have undertaken a trip west.

Winifred looked out of the little ranch-house windows and strove to find ugliness in the wide reaches of barren range. Yet there was a mysterious fascination to those towering hills, a fascination which struck at some hidden depths within her. Glamour, romance. Winifred shut the thought away. There was no romance, except in the overworked imaginations of fiction writers! In another few days she'd leave this all behind. If only she might go now—today—and forget forever the Flying K.

She slipped a cake into the oven and turned to look at the clock. Old Barney and Ross Kenneday had gone in search of strays over on the river breaks. It would be another three hours before they were back. And then, even as she was wondering how to fill in the time, there came the sound of a motor. A few minutes later a small car drew up to the porch.

"Winifred! I knew I'd find you!"

Douglas Greer stood looking in the open door. His thin dark face, shadowed by a soft fedora, looked strained, almost furtive.

The girl felt her old repugnace return. "You!"

"That was a rotten trick Alicia pulled," Greer spoke quickly. "I didn't discover it until a couple of hours later. Then I left the train and have been hunting you ever since. Only this morning I found an old storekeeper in Sundown who said you were out here."

"I see. And now?"

"Listen, Winnie!" Greer came close, dark eyes demanding. "I told you there on the train I was crazy about you. Now maybe you'll believe me! I've come to take you away. We'll make a swell team, you and me, honey!"

"No, no!" Winifred retreated before his eagerness. "I'd give my soul to leave this place but I don't love you or

anybody else, and I don't ever want to."

"All right. As I said before, I don't overplay my hand." Swift calculation lighted the man's thin face. "Where is it you want to go?"

Winifred's pulses leaped. Here, as if in answer to her wish, was a way to leave the Flying K and Ross Kenneday forever! "I'd like to get to Stanton, about eighty miles east, and look for a job."

"Get your things, then. We'll be on our way."

As she hurried to her room at the head of the stairs, she felt a definite exultation. No longer would she be dependent on Ross Kenneday's hospitality! Hastily she wrote a little note:

> Sorry to leave on such short notice but the friend, whose picture you saw, is taking me to Stanton. Whatever wages I may have coming, you may keep as compensation for the trouble you were put to the night of my arrival.
>
> Winifred Froman.

Winifred folded the note, intending to leave it on the kitchen table. But some impulse pulled her irresistibly toward a closed door at the end of the hall. Kenneday's room was behind that door, a room unoccupied since her advent on the Flying K. For a moment Winifred stood before the door, then reached out and opened it.

The room was severe in its plainness, suggestive, somehow, of the unbending coolness of Ross Kenneday himself. A straight narrow bed, with neatly spread blankets, a heavy oaken dresser of an earlier day. Perhaps Winifred had expected to see a picture of Trixie in the room. But there was no picture, except that of an older woman in a little shell frame. The girl noted the wistful smile about faded lips, the wisdom contained in those deep gray eyes. Ross Kenneday's mother. Winifred set the likeness down with a sense almost of sacrilege. Laying the note on the dresser, she turned and closed the door after her. Then she ran down the stairs to where Douglas Greer waited.

An early dusk claimed the rangelands, laying purple shadows among the nearer hills. On leaving the Flying K, Greer turned the car straight east, following a narrow rutted road. He drove with a sort of frenzied haste, turning now and then to scan the backward trail.

"I don't want to take the wrong turn along these cow paths," he explained. "There ought to be a short cut somewhere that'll lead on to a section-line road."

Later he seemed more sure of the way and drove with eyes straight ahead. Winifred, glancing sideward, noted her companion's short upper lip and sloping stubborn chin. Again she felt her old repugnance. Yet beggars can't be choosers. She was lucky to get away from the Flying K. In spite of her determination never again to think of Ross Kenneday, her thoughts swung to him. What would Kenneday think when he found her note?

The car had reached a wooded country, with high hills rising to meet the early stars. Greer drove carefully now, picking the way over rocks and ditches. Steadily the car climbed until at last they reached a shrouded ravine high in the hills. A light glowed through the early dark.

"I've got to see some fellows here," spoke Douglas Greer, stopping the car. "Come."

A swift fear seized the girl. "I'll wait here for you. I—"

"You'll come with me! I didn't bring you this far, baby, only to give you a chance to run out on me. And you might as well know we're not on our way to Stanton and never will be!"

Winifred's heart quailed. What a fool she had been to trust Douglas Greer! Yet the light ahead gave reassurance. The presence of others in that house spelled safety. She stepped to the ground and preceded Greer along a narrow path. Suddenly the door ahead opened and a man appeared in the sharp rectangle of light.

"It's me, Staley," called Douglas Greer.

And then they were within the cabin. It was a bare one-room structure. On a rough table set a smoke-blackened lamp. Two bunks built against the wall, a rusty stove and several boxes made up the room's furniture. A desolate place!

The man named Staley stood lounging against the door-frame, his pale eyes fastened upon Winifred's face. There was something predatory about the man's hollow high-boned cheeks. A shock of sandy hair tumbled over a narrow forehead. His clothes were those of the range, leather wind-breaker, with overalls tucked in cowhide boots. A heavy gun belt dragged at Staley's flat hips.

"I thought we were to pull that Sandpoint job tonight," he growled, gaze swinging to Greer.

"They caught Regan last night. We'll have to lay low a while. Bane, see if you can rustle something to eat."

Winifred turned, pulse quickening. She hadn't realized the presence of another man until then. He rose from an upturned box behind the stove and pushed forward a coffee pot. Winifred had never seen a human being so gross nor one so suggestive of evil. Small black eyes peered from the fatty folds of his face, bushy brows cut the low forehead beneath sparse black hair. Squat and heavy, with long arms hanging almost to his knees, Bane yet possessed a surprising quickness.

"Lay low, eh?" sneered Staley, pale gaze riveted on the open throat of Winifred's blouse. "While you run around chasin' skirts?"

"What I do is my own business, Staley! If you don't like the way I run the gang, get out!"

"So that's the lay! We can stand and twiddle our thumbs with every sheriff in the country at our heels, while you play Romeo!"

Douglas Greer's face turned livid. There was a sinister light in his eyes that Winifred had never seen before. He stood leaning across the table, his gaze boring into that of Staley.

"Take that back, Slim!"

"Like hell I will!"

Staley's hand swept downward. There was a roar, followed by a drifting veil of smoke. A queer expression of surprise became fixed on Douglas Greer's face. Then he slumped to the floor and lay still.

"You've killed him!" Winifred whispered, eyes wide with horror.

"Too touchy on the trigger, Slim," complained the man called Bane. "Reckon whoever's caught trailin' with you'll stretch hemp too."

"So what?"

"Might be just as well if you and me parted company."

Winifred, staring at Greer's still form, was scarcely aware of the other two. And then all at once their words jerked her erect.

"What about the girl?"

"I'll take her with me!"

"Now ain't you obligin'!" sneered Bane. "Reckon I'd like a pretty little filly myself. We'll throw for her." He tossed a pair of dice on the table. "Winner gets the girl, loser buries Greer."

To Winifred it seemed she must be stumbling through some horrible nightmare. Such things as this didn't happen, yet here before her very eyes it was happening! The full force of the situation struck her. She cast about desperately for some way of escape, but the tall, gaunt Staley stood between her and the door.

Dice rattled on the table. "A five and six!" exulted Staley. "You'll have to hurry to beat that!"

Winifred's gaze swung to Bane in fascinated terror. Obese as a toad he stood, the dice cupped in one puffy hand. He shook them with maddening deliberation, his heavy lips curled with some secret humor. The ivory cubes struck the hard boards.

"Two sixes!" Bane gloated. "The girl's mine!"

Crash! In that moment the door burst inward. "Reach!" snapped a voice. "That means all of you!"

Winifred whirled. There in the doorway stood Ross Kenneday, the lamp light glinting on his sheriff's star. Behind him appeared two hard-bitten range riders. Slowly Winifred's hands lifted, unconsciously following the movement of Staley and Bane.

"And what a nice little party we dropped in on!" drawled Kenneday. "Your old pal, Regan, was plenty anxious to save his own skin and told of this hideout here. All right, boys, take these hombres' guns, then let them carry that body out to the horses."

FIVE minutes later, Winifred and Ross Kenneday stood alone in the little bare cabin.

"So this is the end of your career as a gun moll!"

Winifred's blue eyes widened. "Gun moll?"

"Don't tell me you didn't know Doug Greer was Skip the Duke, advance man for the slickest gang of small-town bank robbers west of Chicago! I got word three weeks ago to watch out for him. Also that he was traveling with a beautiful girl as a means of helping to escape identity."

"But that wasn't me! It was Alicia —Alicia Greer, his sister!"

"Greer never had a sister! Besides, you forget you admitted he was your friend," Ross Kenneday said dryly. "that first night when you dropped his picture."

All at once a number of things became clear to her. Douglas Greer's surreptitious "business" affairs—Alicia's lightning jealousy! And all this time Ross Kenneday had been thinking her one of them, had no doubt been waiting that moment when Greer would be drawn back to Sundown in search of his supposed paramour, the girl who had missed the train. In that moment, Winifred knew that never again would the sun hold warmth and light unless she could make Ross Kenneday understand.

"Listen! You've got to believe me!" And then she was telling the grim young sheriff of crowded streets and her longing for a glimpse of ever-rising hills. She told him of the advertisement in the *Chronicle* and the dreams it awakened in her heart. Lastly she spoke of Alicia and Douglas Greer and how the trip which had promised so much had become a sordid, hateful thing, climaxed by that first terrible night in Sundown.

"But Winifred, why didn't you tell me all this before?"

"Tell you!" Her blue eyes flashed through sudden tears. "After the way you talked? Why, you were as hateful as Douglas Greer, only in a different way! And I had thought the West was romantic and the men chivalrous!"

"Reckon I was pretty rough that first night, because you'd queered a lot of plans." Ross Kenneday straightened. "Then afterward, when I thought you were hooked up with that crooked gang—that you were crazy about that rat, Greer—that I'd never have a chance. . . ."

"A chance! What do you mean?"

"Gosh, honey, don't you understand?" The young sheriff's voice suddenly became husky, his eyes pleading. "Didn't you guess I loved you—"

"Love me! But what about Trixie?"

"Who's been telling you about Trixie?"

"Barney, of course! He told me all about her big brown eyes and that new fur coat—"

"Listen, honey! Trixie's a horse, a little trained cow pony that I loaned Bill Stallings to ride in the Sandpoint rodeo."

"But Barney—"

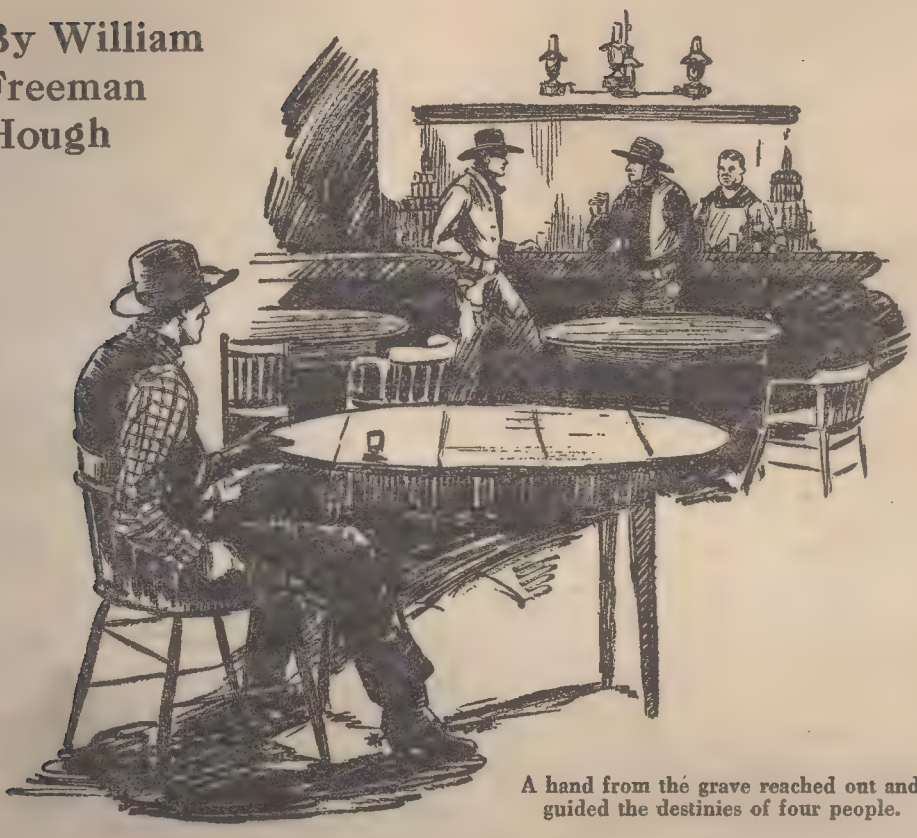
"Doggone that old sidewinder!"

Ross stopped, then suddenly reached out and swept the trembling girl close. "Winifred, honey, our romance so far hasn't had half a chance! But from now on. . . ."

The kiss he gave her held an eternal promise of glamour and romance. And, strangely enough, Winifred found herself returning it!

Little Tebo

By William Freeman Hough



A hand from the grave reached out and guided the destinies of four people.

FROM the brow of the hill the stranger could look both ways, and neither vista was very satisfying. Behind him, a mile away, was the cabin, crumbling, aged before its time, forsaken. The miles of sage and sand were closing in, claiming it, absorbing even the memories that went with it. Even the buzzards passed it by, this dissolving monument to what had once been a man's high endeavors.

The stranger slowly turned his head to the front, bent down and stroked the neck of his high, clay-colored horse, and his thoughts were bitter. In the west the sun was a red bomb, retreating into the horizon's depth; the town below the slope was a shadowy, fugitive procession of clap-trap buildings, unlovely in the twilight, pitted with neglect and avarice.

Larry Grant went on, skillfully building a cigarette as his horse loose-kneed his way down the slope. Stranger, indeed. At least he hoped he was a stranger to most. And his first test came at the little graveyard just above the town. Here, drawn by a gnawing and dreadful curiosity, he halted and sat staring beyond the rusty barbed-wire fence at the weathered crosses and the occasional white stone. Then he went inside, moving slowly through the first line of graves, his eyes became narrow as they probed the grave markers.

He was nursing a faint spark of hope when he noticed the girl and the small boy. They were, at first, dim figures

there where the graveyard fell steeply on the far side, and they looked up at him in startled wonder; looked up from a grave at the head of which was a cracked jar filled with simple prairie flowers.

The girl was fair to look upon even in the half light; Larry's glance touched her but briefly but it recorded that fact. The boy was slight and sallow, with dark hair above a high forehead. There was something about that dark hair and high forehead that reached into Larry Grant's soul and gave it a wrench. He dropped his eyes to the grave marker, read the first half of a name and felt the cold probing of an icy hand.

Silence gripped them though questions trembled on lips. Then the man who had come over the hill touched the brim of his hat and turned back to the gate. Once outside he swung downward again, came to the flat and trotted on into the town. Had the girl recognized him? There was something familiar about her, though in his present frame of mind he found it difficult to concentrate on faces unseen for five years. People changed, grew up.

Jim Stoby, propped against the front of the saloon, saw the stranger dismount across the street and come treading through the deep dust. Jim touched the edge of his dirty bar apron and let speculation touch his half-closed eyes. Strangers came and strangers went—some of them. Tebo Tanner's will was a fickle thing. Tebo owned the town and everybody hated him. He owned a great share of the surrounding range, and those beyond the town limits also hated him. But Tebo had a way with men who took his money.

Jim Stoby held his place by the saloon door and glanced more closely as the stranger drew up before him. The man was tall and supple, possessed of long, flat muscles. His eyebrows were bleached white by the sun, his chin dark for the same reason. He was neither old nor yet young; mature and yet owning something of youth. He glanced down at Jim Stoby and his lips loosened to speech.

"What's the name of the town?" he inquired.

"Pitt," said Jim Stoby. "Drink?"

"I might be induced to libate." The reply was colored by a faintly ironic smile. Stoby got up, sighed and led the way into the saloon. Here, with his ample girth against the bar, he set out a glass and bottle.

"Just travelin' through?" He lifted eyes to the tall man across the bar, stared hard as the light of a lone lamp creased the features. The bartender's breath came in a quick, harsh gasp.

"Mebbe—and mebbe not. Don't let your memory do things to you, Jim."

Jim Stoby swept the empty saloon with an anxious glance and then fixed his attention on the customer. "Five years," he said in a half whisper. "You've changed, but I know you."

"Let it rest in peace. . . . Drink yourself?"

Stoby shook his head and put some of his vast weight on the hands against the bar. Through his thick wits crept a warning, as though he had heard the preliminary rumble of an approaching storm. "Tebo Tanner is still here," he said.

"Interestin'. . . . You shore have taken on weight, Jim. "Last time I saw you—but let it go. Workin' for Tebo?"

Jim Stoby spread pudgy hands. "Had to do somethin'. Lost the ranch."

"Yeah. Didn't we all? Some of us more than that."

"Are you back here to—to get Tebo?"

Larry Grant gazed at the amber liquid in his glass. "What do you think?" he murmured. Stoby got but little satisfaction from this. His brow creased with worry.

"I can tell you things, Larry."

"Don't. You're workin' for Tebo. The town of Pitt, eh? Hotel here?"

"You know dang well—yeah, just down the street. Tebo owns it, too. . . . We did the best we could for Helen."

"Thanks." Larry downed his drink

and aimed for the door. Outside a man slouched past, hat low over shifting eyes. Over his shoulder Larry said, "Your liquor ain't too bad. See you later."

Presently he left the dim street and entered the hotel, the lobby of which was scarcely less dim. At the desk was a man whose one pride must have been a drooping black mustache. With a careless flourish he wheeled the old register about and held out an ancient pen. Larry scrawled something on the sheet and was amused at the clerk's endeavors to read it.

"Take number 40, down the hall. You et yet?"

"Nope."

"Dinin'-room beyond that door. Meals a dollar—in advance."

Larry spread some silver on the counter and turned his back.

Room 40 was in a sad state of repair. The wall-paper sagged and storms had stained the outer wall. He struck a match and touched off the lamp, noting that the chimney had been polished. And, too, the linen was clean, and the wash bowl and pitcher. Somebody with a conscience or a sense of cleanliness had done his best here.

He washed his face and hands, drying them on a torn towel. As he replaced the towel, he felt a slight draught. The door had opened quietly.

Larry's tightened lips relaxed when he saw her, the girl of the graveyard. She stood there, eyes a little wide, pulse pounding in the white hollow of her throat. She held out a hand and then drew it back, and waited.

"Well?" said Larry quietly.

"Don't—don't you remember me?" scarcely above a whisper. There was a hopeful, almost pleading expression in her deep blue eyes.

"It ain't—ain't Carrol?"

"Yes, Larry. Carrol Stoby. You didn't know me up there at the cemetery."

He stepped to her, looked down into her face and saw all the loveliness that had been promised years ago. The pigtails were gone, and the freckles; the flat little chest had bloomed. It didn't seem possible, and yet five years can do things to a girl as well as to a boy.

She had been younger than Helen Grant, but a very close friend. He recalled the day so long past when he had heard the girls planning the future. Carrol had made the staunch statement that she would marry Larry Grant or nobody. Helen had laughed and hoped so. Now Helen was dead. And Carrol was a woman.

"That was her grave?"

"Yes, Larry. I take Little Tebo up there once a week."

Little Tebo! Then it was true. The boy was Helen's son—and Tebo Tanner's. Larry saw the lad's white face again, the high brow and black hair. Like Helen. But he was Tebo's son! Tebo Tanner.

"When did Helen die?" he asked.

"Not more than a month after I wrote you the letter. She wouldn't write and tell you the truth, so I did."

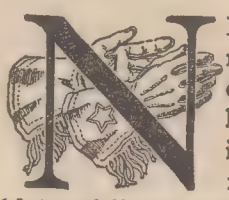
"I was on the drift and didn't get your letter until a year after you sent it. A rancher held it for me till I showed up again."

"He treated her terribly, Larry, even when she was sick. Tebo Tanner is a beast!" Carrol Stoby clenched her hands. "I wanted you to come back and kill him."

"I'm back," he said simply.

A gusty chorus of voices filtered up the hall and the girl backed hastily to the door. "I've got to wait on the tables," she said. "It's supper time."

"I'll eat later," said Larry. "Just now I want to think."



NIGHT had settled mysterious layers of darkness across the hills. It blanketed Pitt in a gloom which was relieved only by the blobs of lights issuing from windows.

Larry Grant sat at the window, chin cupped in palm, his thoughts working along a tortuous trail. Helen had sac-

rificed herself for him. He knew it now; had known it for the past two years. In those days of turmoil he hadn't comprehended. He only knew that in some manner he had been framed into suspicious circumstances and charged with cattle rustling. Tebo Tanner had saved him then—or so he thought. Now he knew that Tebo had been at the bottom of it all.

Tebo's word one way or the other. Which way depended on Helen Grant. And his sister had bowed to Tebo, married him in order that her brother might go free. And he had gone, leaving her in Pitt, the wife of Tebo Tanner. Tebo had absorbed the little ranch as he had many others, and built an empire. Tebo the strong, the shrewd, quick of gun and relentless. A winner.

The dingy dining-room was empty when he entered some time later. Carrol was cleaning up the mess left by previous diners, moving deftly, the very set of her pretty head indicating some secret satisfaction. She came to the table he chose, looked at him and flushed.

"Tebo isn't in town," she said. "I learned that from some of the men."

"What about me?"

"They know you as a stranger, that's all. If you don't leave some man will go out and find Tebo, bring him in."

Larry considered this while he ate. He saw Little Tebo again, standing in the doorway, pallid, fretful, wanting care. Carrol took the boy to some room, was gone fifteen minutes and then returned.

"I always have to put him to bed," she explained. "He's afraid of the dark."

"Where can we talk, Carrol?"

Her eyes became bright and then soft. "I'll come to you, later."

So he went to his room and sat again by the window; and his thoughts went around and around. He heard a rider leave town, the hoofs of the horse kicking up the dry dust which hung like a pale mist in the windless air.

It was ten o'clock before Carrol slipped into the room, explaining in a quick, anxious way, that she had to wash the dishes and do other odd chores before her day's work was finished. When Larry offered to set the lamp going she moved to his side and, by a quick pressure on his arm, indicated that darkness was better.

"I think a man has gone out to find Tebo," she said. "It has happened before. You'll need daylight when you meet him."

"Tell me about Helen."

Carrol Stoby sought his face in the darkness. It was a short time before she answered.

"Helen suffered terribly, Larry. I think it was Tebo's treatment that brought it on. There was something wrong with her heart, and her lungs became weak. We used to talk with each other, and she was always wondering about you, worrying about you. Tebo wasn't so bad until after the baby came. He didn't want a baby. And when he saw that the boy looked like her, was sickly and small, he hated him. He abused them both."

Larry's hands were wet with perspiration. He clenched them tightly, feeling a rising tide of hate not only for Tebo Tanner but for himself. He had deserted his sister.

"Tebo was always throwing it up to her that her brother was a rustler and would have been hung if it hadn't been for him. And one day Helen told him he lied. Tebo Tanner knocked her down."

Larry stalked the length of the room and returned. "How old is Little Tebo?" he asked.

"Four. He's terribly afraid of his father."

"Poor little shaver."

"Tebo knew that he never had Helen completely," she went on. "She had never loved him and never would. That helped to keep him stirred up, for Tebo wanted to completely own everything within his reach. The only day I have ever seen him drunk was the day we buried Helen. He didn't come to the graveyard. Oh, Larry, that man should

be dead! You've got to kill him. I've prayed that you would come."

"Tebo is the father of Helen's boy," he said.

"But Tebo hates his son!" She found his hand, gripped it tightly. "You mustn't think of it that way," she pleaded. "Little Tebo will never amount to anything if—"

"I'm trying to think of what Helen would want," he said.

"I know, I know. You can't see things as I do. Will you try to think of me, too? Oh, Larry, I want to get away from this awful place. Dad and I are just slaves for Tebo. If you only knew how I've dreamed about you coming here to help us. And Dad—he and I have talked about you, hoping to see you ride over the hill."

"I've been a fool, Carrol."

"But you're here now."

"I've got to think this thing out. Little Tebo complicates it plenty."

"Larry, are you afraid of Tebo Tanner?" Then, as he whirled upon her, "Oh, I shouldn't have said that! Forgive me, Larry."

"I'm not afraid of Tebo," he said calmly. "I came here to meet him, wipe out an old score, if Helen would let me. Now she's dead and that part don't matter. I'm thinking of Little Tebo."

"But Larry—"

"Remember," he broke in, "that I am the boy's uncle. If I killed his father the time would come when he'd understand it all."

"I see what you mean," she said, voice dulled by disappointment. "You do as you think best. I'll—I'll go now."

"Carrol?" he called after her, but she was gone down the hall.

MORNING sun turned the earth to a dull yellow, and beat relentlessly upon the aged and gray buildings of the little town. Larry sat his clay-colored horse above the graveyard, solemnly contemplating the country below. He had had a bad night, and now rode without breakfast. He hadn't cared to face Carrol again this morning, and meet her inquiring eyes, for he had not come to any solution of the problem. Why did Fate place a man in such a position?

At length he turned his back upon the town and pushed on across the hills. A man used to riding alone learns to think at that time. He went on and on while the blazing sun beat against him. And as he rode away another man rode in: Tebo Tanner.

Tebo had been on the far side of the range, but welcomed the messenger who brought word of the stranger. Tebo didn't care for strangers. Others had come in and, after Tebo had finished with them, it was revealed that they were possessed of great curiosity concerning certain brands that might be seen on Tebo's range. Strangers were a diversion Tebo could very well do without. And so he hastened to Pitt.

He brushed against the bar of his own saloon and fixed Jim Stoby with a keen glance. Stoby had been expecting this, had tried to prepare himself for the ordeal. He stared back, with all the belligerency of a sleepy hound.

"Who is he, Jim?" Tebo was a large man, yet gifted with easy and quick movements. When aroused, brown specks appeared in his slate gray eyes. They were there now.

Jim Stoby attempted a shrug, the movement bringing a ridiculous quiver to the jelly about his waist. "I dunno," he evaded. "Come in, bought one drink and went to the hotel. I ain't seen him since."

"You're an old timer in these parts, you ought to know if you've seen him before."

Stoby wet his lips and shook his head. It was hard to face Tebo Tanner's sharp eyes. Tebo turned to his messenger. "Is Tashman in town?"

"Yeah. Or was last night."

"Find him. Tell him to lay close to this saloon."

Tebo went to the hotel and looked

at the dog-eared register, and made nothing of the signature there. Restless, he paced to the rear, saw Carrol washing dishes and his son playing upon the floor. Room 40 was empty, so he crossed the street to the barn. The man in charge informed him that the stranger had called for his horse and ridden away.

"Comin' back?" snapped Tebo.

"He didn't say," was the reply. "Offhand, I'd say yes."

"What's he look like?"

"A puncher."

Tebo snorted and swung into the street. Men took his money and ate his food, even helped him kill sometimes, but when it came to information he must always dig it out himself.

In the saloon Jim Stoby was mopping the bar with unusual energy, sweat pouring down his round face. He glanced up quickly as Tebo entered and then went on with his work. It was then that it came to Tebo that Stoby knew the stranger. So Tebo found a chair, sat down, and fixed his eyes upon the bartender. This was torture to Stoby and Tebo knew it, enjoyed it.

Time dragged on. Tashman, as close a henchman as Tebo might have, entered the saloon and found a chair. He said nothing, just waited for developments. Now and then a rider drew up, glanced into the place and decided that there were other and better places to be just at that time. Men had only to look at Tebo Tanner's face to read danger.

And so things held until late afternoon when Larry Grant came down off the hill and barned his horse. Tebo, at the saloon door, saw him, marked him carefully as he passed across the street and entered the hotel. And Tebo's eyes were narrow with deep thought. He pushed his memory back and back, through the years, until some cog in the brain cells clicked into place. Then he drew a deep breath, sent a venomous glance at Jim Stoby and strode from the saloon.

Larry had paused in the lobby, near the door leading into the hotel parlor. There on the worn carpet, playing with a set of wooden blocks, was Little Tebo. The boy looked up, saw and recognized the stranger, and a wistful smile flitted across the pale lips. Larry swallowed stiffly. That was Helen's smile, a gentle expression and yet a little anxious, as though eager to please. It was that smile that clinched Larry's decision.

Carrol crossed the room and stood beside him, looked into his eyes and tried to read the answer. When it did come to her it seemed to sap her vitality. Some of the color fixed her face.

"You won't do it," she murmured.

Larry moved his head from side to side.

"And I've been loving you all these years, loving and hoping."

Larry swallowed stiffly. "I've been hopin' you'd understand," he said.

"You'll go away and leave me—leave us here. I'd rather be dead."

"Carrol, I'll take you with me. I haven't got much to offer, but I'd like to. . . ."

The color came back to her face with a rush. "You'd take me away and leave Helen's boy here to be tortured, to die! You won't kill a beast but you'll leave a sickly boy in his hands! Listen to me, Larry Grant. With all my dreams, with all my hopes, I wouldn't be coward enough to leave Little Tebo alone. I won't go—Oh!"

Tebo Tanner had lifted a foot across the threshold and entered the hotel. He came forward casually, easily, eyes containing just the right shade of curiosity. Bringing up beside Larry and the girl, he let his glance go on into the parlor; then his eyes came back to the pair.

"Howdy, my friend. I hope you're findin' it comfortable here in my hotel. It ain't much, but—. Why, say! Ain't you Larry Grant? By the livin'! Larry Grant. Helen's brother. Back again!" He held out a lean, brown hand, and as Larry took it a new hate encompassed himself and the man before him.

"Well, well," went on Tebo Tanner. "How long has it been? Five years? Can't say as though you appear prosperous. Just passin' through mebbe?"

"I reckon. Passin' through."

"Oh, I wouldn't hurry none. I reckon the folks hereabouts have forgot about that rustlin' you done."

The none too firm decision Larry had reached quivered with the remark. He had never rustled one head of beef in his life. The cords in his neck tightened and he was fully aware that Carrol was watching him carefully.

"You've changed considerable," continued Tebo as Larry held himself in restraint. "Growed a might, and look older." Tebo waved a hand toward the boy playing on the floor. "That's Helen's kid, Larry. Looks like her, eh? Reckon you know she died. Didn't have much sap right from the start. Kid ain't got much sap either. Sort of a runt."

Tebo stepped into the parlor and stood above his son. The boy looked up at him, fear in his blue eyes. Tebo laughed harshly. "Playin' with wood blocks again, eh? Ain'tcha ever goin' to get over that? Here, try your teeth on this!"

He pulled his gun and dropped it to the floor before the child. "Get your mitts aroun' somethin'. that counts in this world. Might as well get used to it 'cause I aim to make you shoot that gun someday."

With another harsh laugh he turned back to Larry. "It's goin' to be some chore to whip that kid into shape, but I'm the man that can do it. . . . Well, where you been, Larry?"

Larry attempted to stem the rising volcano within him. Tebo Tanner was a beast. Look at the way he treated his own son! And Larry knew the man was baiting him. And he knew that Carrol still watched, her regard possibly lessening every passing moment. But up the hill, in her grave., was Helen. What would she want him to do?

"I've been around considerable. Ridin' for various outfits."

"But not draggin' a crooked loop, eh? Well, a man needs but one lesson. If it hadn't been for me . . . ," significantly. "Helen wanted me to help you out."

"And paid plenty," said Larry.

Tebo Tanner laughed. "Oh, we made an agreement, true enough. Sometimes I've been sorry we did. But let's go and have a drink." He slapped Larry across the shoulders and started for the door. Half way there he drew up and turned. "Carrol, fetch me my gun, will you?"

As she brought it out to him Tanner said, "Notice how this girl has growed, Larry? Mighty buxom lass now. Takes good care of the kid, too. I been thinkin' I should give her that job permanent." He shoved his gun back into the holster and led the way out of the door.

LARRY and Tebo Tanner's feet fell softly in the deep dust of the street, and Larry's decision was wavering like the whirl of dust that lifted and fell behind them. He went cool as a subtle tinge of warning came; righted his thoughts and guided them into careful channels. Helen on the hill; Carrol, so obviously disappointed; Little Tebo, back at the hotel and Tebo Tanner leading him to the saloon—for what?

There were now two lamps burning in the saloon, both above the bar. Jim Stoby was having trouble with his shallow lungs, breathing spasmodically. He stood there behind the bar, and as the two men entered, his large head fell forward in something of a gesture. Larry saw him, looked across the room and saw a man seated at the far wall. That man held a sixgun in his lap.

Larry knew, understood, and realized that the odds were against him here. Tebo Tanner had stacked another deck. Larry's eyes were frosty as he settled them upon the backbar mirror. He heard Tebo's command for glasses and a bottle. The back of Stoby's hand was

beaded with perspiration as he set them out.

"This is the man you couldn't remember," said Tebo to Stoby. "Look again, close! Know now?"

"Seems as though—" began Carrol's father.

"Hell, you knew him all the time! He's the lad what left his brandin' iron layin' around so the calves could come set on it." Tebo's harsh laugh beat about the room. The man at the far wall let his chair tip down, and he sat there, bent forward. Next to Tebo, Tashman was accounted the best shot in the country.

Tebo's left hand slid along the bar, laid hold of a glass. "Well, drink up," he said. "Here's to the future."

A faint, ironical smile fixed Larry's lips. His right hand lifted toward the bar, and he caught the suggestion of a movement across the room. And then, like light, his arm fell again, to the butt of his gun. Wheeling sidewise he shot at the sitting man even as Tashman pulled the trigger. A bullet smashed the glass behind the bar. Tashman slid forward from his chair, struck the floor with his head and rammed his hat down over dulling eyes.

Larry whipped his weapon around, saw Tebo's gun bearing full upon him. The hammer rose and fell—but there was no report. Larry shot and watched Tebo's broad chest jerk. The man was looking at his gun as he slid along the bar. His hairy hand jerked, pulled at the trigger. Again the hammer rose and fell with a sharp, empty click. And then Tebo Tanner went on down to lie in the stained sawdust on the floor.

"Gawd!" husked Jim Stoby and pressed the bar so hard his fat hands were bleached of color.

Feet rushed in the street and Larry whirled to face the door. Half a dozen men drew up before the saloon. Larry stepped over the body of Tebo and crouched in readiness.

"There'll be no sorrow in Pitt this night," said Jim Stoby. "Don't worry about those gents out there."

Slowly Larry bent down and took the gun from Tebo's stiffening fingers. With a flip he swung the cylinder open and saw there were no cartridges. The gun was empty!

"I thought you was a goner, Larry." Stoby's tongue flicked out to touch dry lips. "It was a plant, and I couldn't warn you."

The saloon doors opened and Carrol, white of face, burst in. One glance and she swayed back.

"Carrol, you git outa here," barked her father.

Larry walked quickly to the front, took her arm and moved her through the door. Outside his arm slipped about her waist, and he drew her along, back toward the hotel.

"I've been waiting in the street," she choked. "I knew that Tebo was up to something."

"Tebo is dead," he said gently and walked on.

At the hotel steps he paused, looked down into her face. "I was trapped, honey. Two of them back there. They would have got me if it hadn't been for you. It was a brave thing to do, Carrol."

"I always knew you were brave," she whispered.

"I'm not speakin' for myself. I mean you."

"Me?" She looked up at him, lashes wet with tears.

"Tebo's gun was empty. You lifted his shells."

She grasped his arm. "No! No, I didn't!"

"Then who—"

"Larry!" she cried and ran up the hotel steps.

He followed her, across the small lobby and into the dingy parlor. Joining her there he stood and gazed at the floor. Little Tebo lay on his side, eyes closed in sleep. Near-by were the wooden blocks, fashioned into a small corral. And in that play corral were cattle—four of them, shiny new cartridges.

Carrol dropped down beside the sleep-

ing boy and took one small, tightly clenched hand in her own. As she pried open the fingers two more cartridges fell to the floor. The girl dropped her face into her hands and began to weep softly.

Larry Grant bent down and lifted his sister's son into his arms. Almost reverently he kissed the little white forehead. Little Tebo's lips twisted into a faint smile. He slept on.

"Larry?" Carrol stood up and faced him. "Isn't this your answer? Didn't Helen from her grave —?"

"I wonder," he said softly. "I don't reckon I could bring myself to doubt it."

"And now you'll take us away from here?"

Larry's head moved gently from side to side. "Everythin' belongs to Little Tebo, now. I'll stay and see that things go right for him. Somebody has got to run the ranches and this town till he gets old enough to handle things himself."

"I suppose so, Larry."

"And he'll need a mother—permanent. Will you take the job, Carrol?"

Carrol Stoby leaned against him, felt his free arm go about her waist. There, with her head against his breast she whispered, "Yes, Larry."

And Little Tebo slept on.

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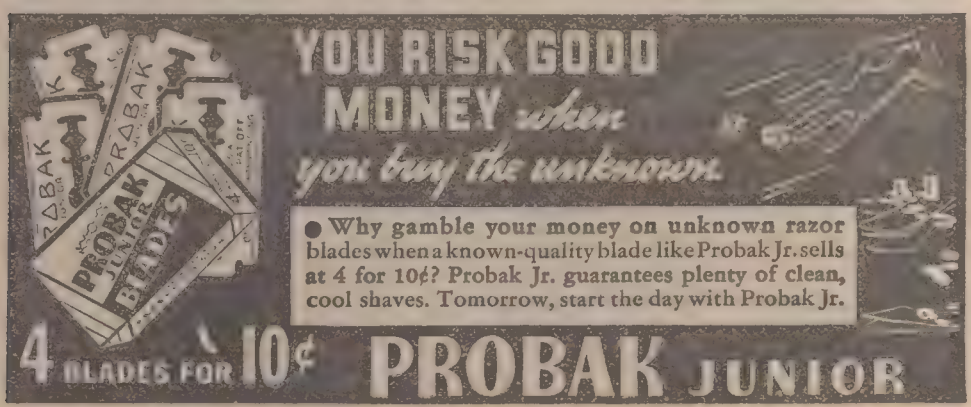
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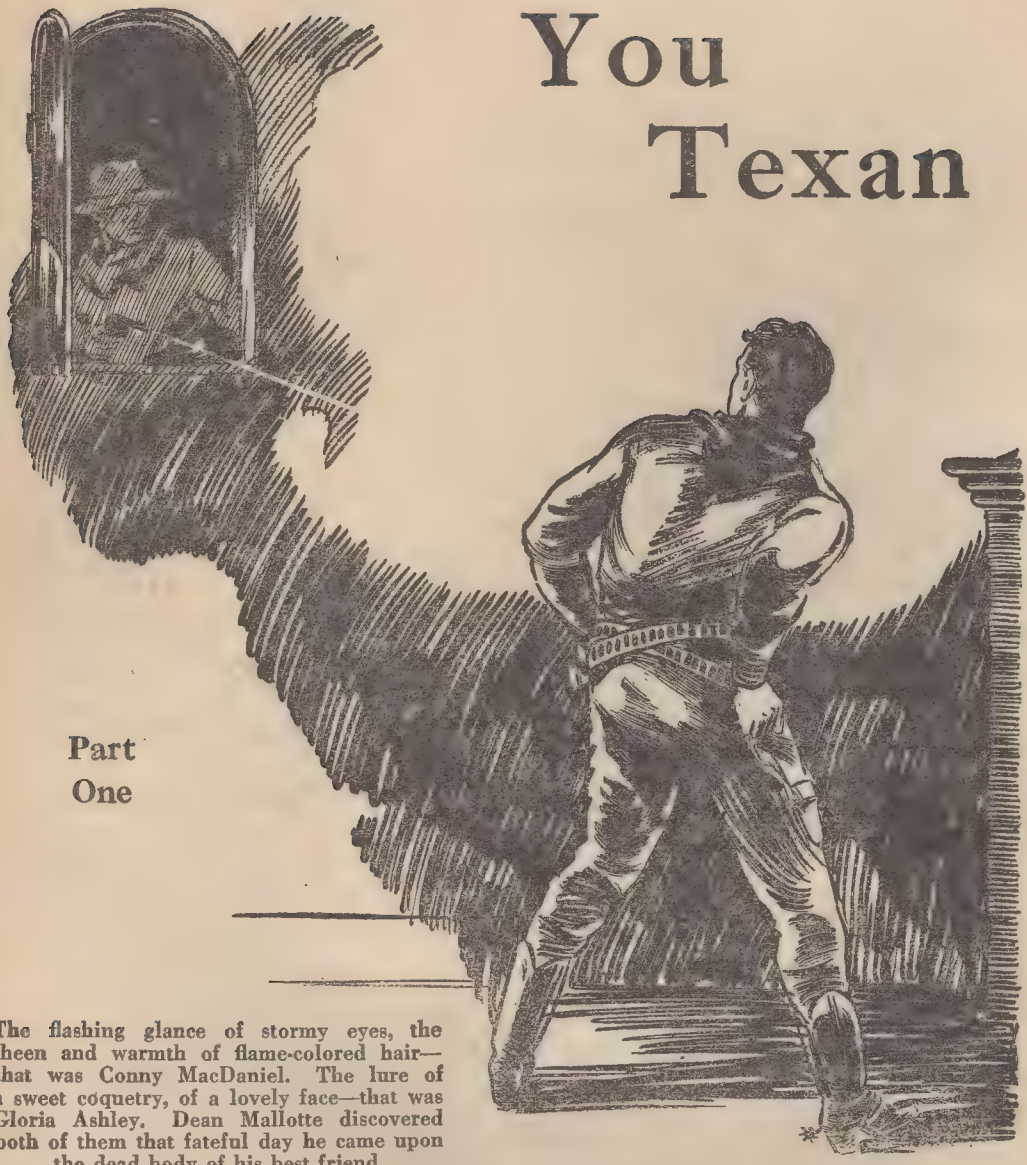


The flashing glance of stormy eyes, the sheen and warmth of flame-colored hair—that was Conny MacDaniel. The lure of a sweet coquetry, of a lovely face—that was Gloria Ashley. Dean Mallotte discovered both of them that fateful day he came upon the dead body of his best friend.

CHAPTER I

Creede

A JUMBLE of voices rose suddenly from beyond the clumped pines at the bend of the trail, where the sun, slanting through a rift in the storm-clouded sky, fell upon the bleached canvas of a wagon top. Mallotte's pack mare promptly snorted, bolted off the beaten way, and came to a quivering halt breast deep in thorny brush. Mallotte swore good naturedly, and loosened an end of his picket rope.

"Blast your buckskin hide! We've passed bogged freight outfits every day for the last week, but you can still throw a fit at the sight of one. Sho', now! Come out of there befo' I blister you!"

A nudge of a spur sent his blue roan gelding into the brush after the mare. The rope's end swished and thudded. The mare snorted and crashed around,

By James W. Routh

doing her best to buck loose the light pack that burdened her, putting on a convincing show of terror. Then, as suddenly as it had come upon her, the spell passed. She returned meekly to the trail.

"Now quit foolin' and get along!" Mallotte cautioned her sternly.

In a chastened mood, she got along. The roan followed her down the trail, stepping with mincing daintiness. Melting snow and torrential rains made for treacherous footing even on well beaten trails; heavy traffic, brought about by the discovery of gold near Twin Peaks, had done nothing to improve matters. Mud sloshed and sucked under the hoofs of the horses. High up on the wooded slope southward a jay screamed. The sun glinted on rain-jeweled leaves and twigs, grass was green in open spaces, here and there tiny wild flowers nodded shyly. A gust of damp wind flattened the wide brim of the young Texan's hat. He drew in a deep breath of soft, pine-scented air,

and came suddenly to full alertness. One voice lifted with abrupt and harsh distinctness beyond the bogged freight wagon.

"Put that scatter-gun down afore you git hurt, Perfessor. You ain't shootin' nobody."

The flat and droning timbre of the voice fell unpleasantly upon Mallotte's ear. He nudged the roan to a faster pace, and harkened to the "perfessor's" calmly spoken reply:

"I assure you I shall shoot if you persist, sir. And buckshot, I am reliably informed, inflicts an ugly wound."

That, surely, was the voice of a cultured gentleman, marked with the slurring softness of the South. But Mallotte was not surprised. The gold strike was a lure that drew the unfit as often as the fit. He sent the roan splashing around past the bogged freight wagon, to which was attached a pair of fine Missouri mules.

In front of the bogged vehicle was halted a two-seated buckboard. A sunbonneted woman occupied the driver's seat of the smaller vehicle, holding taut reins against the nervous fidgeting of a team of sorrel horses. Beside the buckboard stood a slender, gray-bearded man, a double-barreled shotgun in his hands, his trimly proportioned body very erect in shiny broadcloth. At his shoulder and slightly behind him loomed a gigantic negro, who gripped an ax in a powerful black fist. Confronting the travelers, three men on horseback blocked the wagon trail. The middle one of the horsemen turned a scowling glance upon Mallotte, and again the flat and droning timbre of his voice struck discordantly upon the young Texan's ear.

"These here mountains," he said, "is shore loaded with pesterin' pilgrims lately. Where'd you come from?"

He was long limbed, lean and saturnine. Inverted steer-horn mustaches drooped over his thin-lipped, narrow mouth, a jutting hawk nose thrust between straight dark brows and pale cold eyes, the scar of an old knife wound lay across his left cheek-bone. He possessed a certain angular grace of body that hinted at more than normal strength, and cat-like swiftness marked even in his slightest gesture.

"Sho', now!" Mallotte's smile was sleepy, and his drawl was slow and casual. "If I'd knowed you would be interested, I'd have wrote it down as I come along."

A growl lodged in the scar-faced man's throat, heat mounted in his pale eyes, but as he was about to speak something like a shadow flickered across his face and his lips thinned together. Mallotte was very watchful. He took note of the shadow and the withheld retort, and a glint came into his smoke gray eyes. The man, it seemed, had recognized him, although to the best of his recollection they had not crossed trails before.

"I didn't just catch the drift of that remark," he said. "Or mebbe it's a spell of colic that's took you. Too bad. A week or so back I met up with one of them medicine shows that was peddlin' a right potent cure for such afflictions. An ol' Injun herb remedy, good for man or beast. Cure your corns or disposition, first rate for calluses on the hands, sour stomach, spots befo' the eyes. If I'd knowed the condition you're in, I shorely would have fetched you a bottle."

An unmistakable giggle came from the driver's seat of the buckboard. One of the scar-faced man's companions choked and coughed. The other had trouble with a restless horse. The man himself sat motionless, his head thrust slightly forward, the livid mark on his cheek-bone standing out against the deepening of his color like a raised and livid welt. The woman's giggle ended in a smothered gasp. The gray-haired man with the shotgun gripped his weapon. The gigantic negro rolled his eyes until the whites showed. Up on the slope of the mountain eastward quail whistled, and the gusty wind made an eerie murmuring in the pines that shaded the muddy trail. Then

came a moment of utter silence that stretched on and on until it seemed that it would never end.

Mallotte, slouching a little in his saddle, outwardly at ease and unconcerned with that sleepy smile still upon his wide lips, felt his nerves screw tight and his senses strain in alert and calculating awareness. He needed no instruction in regard to the character and habits of the man who glowered at him and seemed to have fallen into some grim reverie that might at any instant explode in swift and deadly action. This man was bad, a killer, a gunman with all the fierce and sensitive pride of the breed. Shrewdly Mallotte watched and waited, calculating with careful precision the exact time and nature of the reaction that was to come, preparing himself to meet it instantly. While perhaps ten seconds ticked past slowly, the silence held. Then all at once and before the droning voice edged into the hush, he sensed that the killer's choice had been made.

"So!" The handsome, hawk-like head moved deliberately in a contemplative nod. "You've had your joke, Texican. It ain't considered good judgment to get funny with Ike Creede. Mark it down that this was your lucky day. And mebbe say a word of thanks to the lady."

The corners of Mallotte's smoky eyes pinched in the least bit, meeting the hard challenge of the other's look, but his slow drawl was not disturbed.

"I'm always mindful of my obligations, Creede. The name is Mallotte. Since I'm plannin' to settle down hereabouts permanent, in the cattle business, it's possible we might meet again. *"¿Quien sabe?"* Did you say you and your friends was ridin' on ahead? *¡Adios, amigos!"*

Having purposely explained himself thus fully, he lifted his wide hat with mock politeness, disclosing a thatch of rust red hair that waved back from a broad brow that was very white in contrast with the deep bronze of his lower face. A clean shaven face it was, long and angular, with a stubborn jaw to belie the humor of wide lips that curved upward at the corners, and a straight, pugnacious nose. Creede stared, and again something flickered in his frosty eyes, supporting Mallotte's conviction that even before he named himself the man had recognized him.

"You might do some ridin' yourself, Mallotte," said Creede. "Back the way you come. This mountain air ain't healthy for your kind!"

So saying, he yanked his horse around, spurred it cruelly and, followed by his companions, went pounding away down the trail in the direction of Twin Peaks. Mallotte gazed after them thoughtfully.

The plain warning lent further weight to his conviction. Creede had recognized him, but Creede had been uncertain as to his status, and therefore had voiced a threat instead of resorting to gun-play. Mallotte was reminded sharply of the wording of Ben Coryell's last letter, which had reached him just as his resignation from the Rangers became effective, a few days before he began his trip overland to join the man who was to be his partner in the cattle business. Ben wasn't much at writing, and he'd avoided definite statements which, he intimated, might get into the wrong hands, if the mail stage should be held up again on the way out of the mountains.

"I like this country as well as you do," he'd written. "But we may have to change our minds about settling down in it. When you see the layout you will *sabe* what I mean, and we can figure out what to do. I have some friends here that I would like to tip off, only they would not believe me now, and anyhow I will keep my mouth shut until you get here. I also will hold my nose account of a strong smell of skunk. I think you met up with the same animile once, but I cannot be sure of that yet."

Mallotte had just about memorized that letter, word for word. He'd puzzled a good deal over what Coryell

had meant, and the hint of impending trouble bothered him. He wanted to settle down in peace and quiet in this country which, during a brief visit two years ago, had appealed to him as no other had ever done. He wanted his experience as a lawman to be a closed book; he'd had his fill of swapping lead with outlaws, of dispensing law and order. But now, on approaching Twin Peaks, recognition of him had changed the ideas of a tough hombre on trouble bent. And he'd been given warning.

"It don't make sense," he thought. "And I don't nowise like it."

The splash and clatter of hoofs faded swiftly as the three riders vanished around another bend. The gray-haired man sighed, lowered his shotgun, and turned to look up at Mallotte. The negro drew a frayed shirt sleeve across his ebony forehead, wagged his head and mumbled. A muffled sound came from the buckboard. But still Mallotte could not tell if the woman who uttered it were old or young, plain or pretty.

"Young man," said the holder of the shotgun, "I am deeply in your debt. That man Creede is a scoundrel, sir. If you had not arrived so opportunely I undoubtedly would have been forced to defend my daughter from his advances. He had the temerity, sir, to demand that she should—er—submit to his embrace in return for his assistance in hauling us from the mire. This after first asserting that he was a tax collector and would levy a certain assessment—a hundred dollars, to be exact—before permitting me to transport my printing press and household goods further along this highway. He had the unmitigated effrontery, sir, to state that a journalist might easily become a public nuisance."

Mallotte was uncertain as to which insult ranked first in the estimation of the gentleman whose chattels, profession and daughter were so closely related in his involved, but surprisingly lucid, statement.

"Sho', now!" he murmured, keeping a straight face. "The ornery skunk!"

"Quite so," agreed the older man. He removed his hat from a head thickly crowned with stiff, iron-gray hair, executed a formal bow that somehow, in spite of the circumstances and environment, was by no means ridiculous. "My daughter, Mister Mallotte—Miss Gloria Ashley, late of Polk County, Missouri. Jackson, you good for nothing scamp, grab those sorrels while Miss Gloria relaxes."

"Yassah!"

The big negro jumped to the heads of the sorrels. One of the team of mules shook itself and stamped off a fly, spattering mud that made Mallotte's roan sidle away with tossing head. Gloria Ashley twisted her reins about the whipstock, stood up and shook down her gingham skirts.

"Mr. Mallotte," she said, in a high, sweet voice, "I'm sure you saved my father's life! That horrible man—" She shuddered daintily and thrust the sunbonnet back from her face. "How can we ever thank you?"

Mallotte, hat in hand, stared at her. He had seen pretty girls before, but none prettier than Gloria Ashley. Her large black eyes were full of coquetry, and her full red lips must give any man ideas and aspirations. A gust of wind flattened her gingham dress, drew it snugly about her slender body. Her glance was a shy challenge that made his blood leap.

"My gosh, ma'am!" he drawled gently. "One of your smiles would shorely pay a man for doin' a deal more than I was able to do."

Her laugh was pleased, and she blushed prettily. Being a young man of normal habits and instincts, who had not known many women in his life, Dean Mallotte began to rate this a red letter day.

"Before you two begin to drown in each other's glances," said Ashley dryly, "perhaps we might consider the humdrum matter of getting out of this bog hole."

A few minutes later the heavy freight

wagon rolled up onto harder ground. Meantime Mallotte learned something more about his new friends. Philip Ashley was bound for Twin Peaks, intent upon establishing a weekly newspaper in the rapidly growing mining camp which, a few months ago, had been an unambitious cow-town. Ashley might be pompous and inclined toward oratory, but there was in him the fire of sincerity.

"Civilization," he declaimed, "is marching westward. We are developing a splendid new country, sir. Lawless men like Creede must not be permitted to impede our progress. They are a blight, to be stamped out firmly. My paper shall be a rallying ground for an informed public opinion."

Mallotte was inclined to be dubious. Twin Peaks probably was not very different from other boom towns. A man like Ashley was sure to be out of his element, at least for a time; he would have to adjust himself to conditions as they were in a primitive community.

"Reckon to become a subscriber, suh," said the Texan in his soft, drawling voice. "Anyhow, we'll surely meet again soon. Once you get to town it ain't likely you'll be bothered by hombres such as Creede. But if I was you, suh, I wouldn't expect too much yonder. The town is li'ble to be plumb rough and plenty wild."

Turning then to the girl, he took off his hat and smiled down at her.

"I ain't sayin' good-by, Miss Gloria—just *hasta la vista*—until we meet again! You'll save a few of your smiles for me, sort of private?"

"Perhaps," she murmured, her dark eyes full of coquetry and possibly a little wistful too. "Anyhow, you might come and find out."

"You bet," he said fervently.

Then he was gone, riding away on his blue horse, hazing the pack mare ahead of him along the muddy wagon trail, where the hoof-prints of the three horses that preceded him quickly drew his narrowed and speculative glance. Watching him, Gloria sighed a small sigh and tucked a stray curl beneath her sunbonnet, and wondered if he would look back from the bend of the trail. But he did not. He rode on, his thoughts turned quickly from the girl whom he hoped to know better to the man in whom, at their first meeting, he sensed that he had found a dangerous enemy.

"Creede!" he muttered once. "It can't be him that Ben had in mind. But if it ain't—"

He shook his head, his wide lips thinned and tightened, a queer, cold glitter in his smoky eyes. Unconsciously he straightened a little, and wariness fell upon him, as befits a man who finds himself riding into hostile territory.

CHAPTER II

Murder

MORE than an hour later Mallotte drew rein at a three-way forking of the trail. Ahead, high against a patch of clear blue sky, veiled in thin, curling mist, he glimpsed the snow-white crests of the twin mountains that gave Twin Peaks its name. In between lay Crazy Horse Creek, a raging torrent of foam-flecked yellow water, whose rush and roar filled the warming air with menacing sound.

One branch of the trail twisted into the flood, and struck away on the other side of the stream in a short cut to the boom town. A second fork twisted southward along the watercourse, a wagon trail that crossed the creek over a bridge almost within sight of the town. The third fork, angling northward, appeared to end a short distance up-stream where the canyon narrowed between black rock walls and foaming water arced whitely in a fifty-foot falls; actually it led out over the rim to a high mountain valley.

"Havin' announced myself," Mallotte said aloud, musingly, as was sometimes

his habit when alone, "it might be a good idea to jog along to Twin Peaks befo' lookin' up Ben."

He turned it over in his mind again. If Ben Coryell had wind of some undercurrent skullduggery, had linked up some crookedness with a man whom he expected his partner to recognize and help him to unmask, it might be good sense to avoid disclosing their partnership for the present. Ben was horse foreman at el Rancho de los Tres Alamos, the biggest cattle outfit in the mountains. This meant to Mallotte that cattle rustling must play some part in the crookedness; it also meant that the man Ben suspected of crookedness must be in good standing at Tres Alamos Rancho, where no one would believe him a crook without more evidence than Coryell had been able to unearth. Possibly the suspect was on the ranch payroll. Such things happened. Even if Tres Alamos was an old Spanish grant, and had been under a single ownership for generations, there was no reason why such should not be the case there.

"We'll drift along to Twin Peaks," Mallotte concluded. "I'm kind of curious to see who Creede associates with, anyhow. He took the long trail, which makes it good enough for me. Git along, foolish!"

He swung the end of his picket rope against the flank of the temperamental mare, headed it along the down-stream fork, where the prints of the horses ridden by Creede and his companions pointed the way. In following, Mallotte glanced again across the riotous stream, inclined to be resentful of anything that caused him to diverge from a direct course to his destination. As he looked a rider appeared on the far side of the creek, spurring recklessly down the slippery trail that mounted from the water's edge and wound around a tangle of thorny oaks. The Texan's yell of warning was automatic.

"Hi! Watch it, you half-wit! You'll get yourself—"

A gust of warm damp wind snatched the cry from his lips, caused him to duck his head and reach for his hat. His hand tightened on the rein, brought the blue gelding to a halt. He looked again, and yelled again. The horse across the creek was coming down too fast to stop. Squatting on its haunches, it skidded down a clay bank into the swirling yellow waters of the floor. There, in sudden terror, it lunged, reared, tried to whirl back. But its rider had other ideas. A miracle of horsemanship kept it right side up, sent it plunging breast deep into the current. It struck out, swimming. Then, when least expected, horse and rider did a sort of barrel roll.

They came up, separated by several yards. The horse turned and headed for land. The rider, clinging to a small drifting log, was carried rapidly downstream. And Mallotte found himself out with roily water washing his hips. swinging a short loop for a cast from the back of the staunchly swimming roan. It was a lucky cast. The loop settled about the shoulders of the swimmer. With a yell to hold tight, Mallotte swung the roan back to the muddy bank.

Grunting and snorting, the big gelding scrambled up onto solid ground, snaking the half-drowned victim along behind. Mallotte dropped into ankle deep mud to finish the job, hauling in the rope hand over hand. It was rough treatment, but he reckoned the fool deserved it for trying such a crazy stunt.

"There you are," he growled, shaking the rope loose. "Toss it off. You're alive, I reckon, but I ain't shore you deserve to be. And if I got my rope wet account of a corpse— My gosh!"

A lovely mud-spattered face lifted to his. A streaming, roll-brimmed hat, which somehow had stayed on throughout the watery ordeal, jerked off to reveal a shimmering cloud of flame-colored hair, glistening wet, waist long. Flannel shirt and bibless overalls clung to a tall, splendidly formed body, high breasted, long of limb. Mallotte

gulped, utterly dumbfounded. The woman scrambled up furiously to face him.

"You—you perfect fool!" Her voice was deep for a woman's, full of husky melody. "What's the idea of dragging me out by the neck like—like a damn steer? You—you—"

Mallotte's temper, ordinarily well disciplined, mounted unexpectedly in hot resentment. But his drawl was very soft.

"That's right, ma'am. Hunt the proper word. It ain't the one you used. Seems like you've got that one registered for your own brand. Sho'! It wasn't me that rode a scared bronc into the flood and got myself half drowned!"

She gasped. Her eyes—lovely eyes that were the color of crushed violets—seemed to take fire. For a moment it seemed to Mallotte that she would leap at him, striking and clawing. And although his temper strained in that unaccustomed manner, a tingling of admiration swept him. Whoever and whatever else she might be, this girl was fearless, high spirited, and altogether beautiful in a most exciting way.

"You impertinent— How dare you talk that way to me, you—you Texas saddle bum!"

"Mebbe that's why," Mallotte suggested dryly. "I ain't obligated none to flatter you. But I ask your pardon, ma'am. I don't know you well enough to judge if you go around doin' foolish things, or if you just have spells."

The girl quivered, her lips tightened upon a bit of mud, which she promptly and vigorously spat out. The look she gave him he was never to forget, nor was he ever quite able to classify it.

"I think you're going to regret that, cowboy!" she said huskily. "In fact, I'm sure of it!"

Then, turning on her heel, she started away north along the muddy trail. Mallotte, completely amazed, stared for a moment before he could grasp the fact that she was actually walking out on him, dripping wet, shivering from the chill of her emersion in the icy creek, at he wasn't sure how many miles from shelter.

"Hold on!" he called, coming alive. "Say, where you goin'?"

No answer. No slowing or hesitation in her swift departing step. He said something under his breath, grabbed the rein that ground tied the roan gelding, and hustled in pursuit of her. If she heard him, she gave no sign of it. Nor did she quicken her pace. She just kept going, with a kind of deliberateness that was a far more effective proof of her intention than an attempt to run would have been. She stopped only when he stood in front of her, with the roan behind him, blocking the trail.

"Get yourself and that crow bait out of my way!"

The way she said it was like a slap in the face. Mallotte yearned to shake some sense into her. Instead, he turned and began to work at the slicker roll tied to the cantle of his saddle.

"I didn't haul you outa the crick to stand around and watch you catch pneumonia," he said. "You're shiverin' fit to split and you'll shore chatter them purty teeth plumb out, first thing. The breeze is right perky. Here, wear this blanket, ma'am."

"I don't want your blanket! I don't want—"

"Shore," he drawled. "You don't want nothin' of mine, and you hate me from the mud up. All right. All I want is for you to wrap this blanket around yoreself—so!"

Before she could avoid him, he had stepped close and swung the blanket around her wet shoulders.

"Tuck it in," he advised. "Unless you're plannin' to swim back across the creek."

Her chin tipped up. No woman had ever looked at him so scornfully, so proudly, or with such open dislike. He stared down at her glumly, every masculine instinct within him rising in rebellion, straining to assert itself. This was a headstrong filly in need of discipline. Unconsciously he began to compare her with the other girl he'd

met that morning, the slender young lady from Polk County, Missouri. As easy to compare them, he thought, as a lady and a catamount.

"I may be loco," said the girl, "but I'm not that bad." Suddenly, with a flash of a smile, she shivered and drew the blanket more tightly about her. "That breeze is cold!"

Mallotte, for the moment, could not speak. She continued to look at him, gravely now, and dabbed at her cheeks with a wet bandanna. The dabbing spread the mud, without working much of an improvement. But when she smiled at him again, something in the middle of him seemed to tighten up and squeeze the breath out of him.

"Where," he blurted, "was you goin' when you started to walk out on me, ma'am? Mebbe you can ride one of my hosses better."

"I can ride any horse you can," she retorted. "And I'm going to Tres Alamos Rancho, of course."

That would be it. Mallotte wondered why he hadn't been quicker at putting two and two together. This girl— He set his jaw and looked at her. She was smiling again, dangerously.

"I am Consuelo Maria MacDaniel," she said sweetly. "Does your pack mare ride?"

Mallotte took a deep breath. He had heard about Consuelo MacDaniel, but she had been away somewhere during his previous and only other visit here, when Ben Coryell had introduced him to her brother, Don José, master of el Rancho de los Tres Alamos, offspring of an Irish adventurer and a lady of New Spain. Yes, he'd heard about her, and what he had heard should have made him recognize her at once. They called her a firebrand, a wilful girl who invariably did exactly what she chose to do. Coryell had told him that Conny —as everyone called her—could outride, outshoot, out-everything most men. And having seen her now, Mallotte believed what he had been told.

"Bein' a lady," he said, "the pack mare is kind of skittish, but she'll tote a passenger if she's obliged to. Likewise, Miss MacDaniel, I'm Dean Mallotte, recent of Texas, and Ben Coryell is a friend of mine."

"A man should be known by his friends," said Conny crisply. "But I've always thought pretty well of Ben."

He didn't know exactly what to make of that. He rubbed his chin uncertainly, found the glint in her lovely eyes peculiarly confusing, turned hastily to bring up the mare. Conny, mounted on the roan, with the blanket wrapped snugly about her, twisted her head for a look across the creek. Her horse had scrambled out onto the opposite bank, and was nibbling at a patch of greening grass.

"If he rolls on that saddle," she declared, "I'll have him skinned. But he'll make a fair horse when he's thoroughly broken and gets some of the crazy ideas out of his head."

Mallotte was startled at what this remark implied, but he contrived to conceal it under a grin. "Part broke broncs is apt to have notions," he drawled. "Are you trainin' him for a divin' horse in a circus?"

"Please spare me your wit!" she snapped. "Horses aren't the only animals that have notions, Mister Mallotte."

Again he had no retort. She rode on ahead of him where the trail narrowed. He found himself watching the play of the sunlight on her hair, the unconscious grace of her long-limbed body that lent itself easily to every motion of the roan. An odd feeling came to him of being at the sheer edge of a high cliff, with the wind rushing about him, roaring in his ears, with the pull of empty space below and the reach of the cold, bare sky above. The flat report of gunshots, traveling against the breeze, broke the spell.

There were several shots, spaced at irregular intervals, not signal shots but such as might be fired in battle. Mallotte sent the mare around and ahead of the roan. Conny immediately pulled up abreast of him, and they sat so, listen-

ing. The rumble and roar of the swollen creek closed in upon the echoes of the shots. A small slide broke away and went rattling down the face of the canyon wall. The mare jumped and snorted. The roan gelding moved uneasily, jerking its head.

"Be still!" muttered Mallotte.

"Another killing!" said Conny in a strange, tight voice.

Something sent a shiver quivering along Mallotte's spine. He rode ahead of the girl along the narrow trail that mounted steeply to the rim of the canyon, twisted through brush and boulders, and at the end of a quarter of a mile emerged upon the rolling grass lands of a high valley. A riderless horse had come to a stop there, and stood facing them, its head flung high. A short distance beyond the horse the body of a man sprawled face down in the mud at the side of the trail.

A gasping cry broke from Conny. Mallotte grabbed the head of the roan as she would have spurred past him.

"Let go! I've got to see—"

"Shore." His bronzed face was stern, and his voice was like breaking ice. "But I'll handle this, I reckon. Use your head. Is that a Tres Alamos horse?"

"It's Ben Coryell's horse!" she said, her lips white. "It's Ben—"

CHAPTER III

The Vanishing Trail

MALLOTTE knelt beside the body of his friend. Death had come quickly to Ben Coryell. There was a patch of blood on the breast of his shirt beneath the heart; another bullet had gone through his neck. Mallotte took heed of the sixgun near an outflung, lifeless hand, and his glance narrowed and shifted, following the hoof-prints of Coryell's horse. His smoky eyes rested briefly upon a clump of brush fifty yards east of the trail, veered toward a pile of boulders, double that distance west and near the crest of a ground swell. And as he looked horsemen loomed there against the clearing sky. He came to his feet, guns leaping into his hands. The girl called sharply:

"Wait! They're our boys!"

Only a little of the tension went out of him. He moved back a pace from the dead man, holstered his guns, watched warily as the half-dozen cowboys raced down the slope. In the lead of them was a lanky chap with a keen brown face and a long enquiring nose.

"Miss Conny! What— Gawd! It's Ben! An' this— Start talkin', hombre!"

Down the chap came out of his saddle, a leveled gun in his hand covering Mallotte. The other cowboys, five of them, pulled up in a tight circle, their thin brown faces grim and scowling.

"Go slow, Tom!" cried the girl sharply. "We got here just ahead of you."

Mallotte, keyed to hair-trigger alertness, let a moment of uncertainty pile up while his smoky eyes probed and searched. He found no hint of guilty knowledge on any of the faces that turned toward him with suspicion and hostility that was only partly abated by Conny's assurance. But it was very plain that these Tres Alamos riders were disposed to take nothing for granted. There was a certain tight-lipped bleakness about them that lent vivid significance to the words Ben Coryell had cautiously penned. Mallotte's perceptive faculties were exceptionally keen. He sensed that the portent of trouble cast a gray shadow over this mountain range, caused distrust to touch every stranger and every unusual circumstance, lent the suspicion of these cowboys a wider basis here and now even than the killing of Coryell. His frigid drawl was designed to probe beneath the surface tension.

"What makes you think I've any talkin' to do? Ben Coryell was my friend. I come here to find him dead, and the first head that pops up over the sky-line is yours!"

He heard Conny's startled gasp. His

smoky glance marked the utter astonishment that flashed across the long-nosed cowboy's face, followed instantly by a flare of anger, an upward jerk of his lowered gun.

"By gosh, you—"

"Put your iron where it belongs," said Mallotte, with a sleepy smile. "Let's start from scratch and get our facts straight."

The girl, still clutching the blanket about her wet clothing, slid down into the mud. Her husky voice filled another moment of uncertainty.

"That's right, Tom Clovis. Get the facts straight. Let the gentleman tell you about himself and what he knows. He's a gifted talker."

That was sheer malice. It caused red to mount under the bronze of Mallotte's cheeks, made him clamp down his jaws and long again to take her by the shoulders and shake some sense into her. This was a serious business, yet she could work out her peculiar spite against him, add her personal touch of venom to the hostility of her cowboys. Tom Clovis backed away a pace.

"I said to start talkin', hombre! Who are you? What's your ante in this game?"

Again the girl got her word in first, with a toss of her flame-colored hair and a curl of her red lips.

"He says he is Dean Mallotte, from Texas. Having dragged me out of Crazy Horse Creek at the end of his rope—like a steer or a chunk of drift wood—he seems to think he has a right to run things to suit himself. But he didn't shoot Ben, although he may know who did!"

A mutter went around the circle of cowboys. Mallotte, watching Tom Clovis closely, saw something flicker in the long-nosed puncher's keen brown eyes.

"I aim to find out who did," the Texan drawled. "Startin' right now. You've got a double-actin' tongue, Miss MacDaniel. But—"

"You claim to be Dean Mallotte?" demanded Clovis curtly.

"He claims a number of things," put in Conny waspishly.

Mallotte's ears burned, and straining temper knotted the muscles at the points of his jaws.

"I don't recollect advancin' any claims I couldn't back up if necessary," he said coldly. "But this debate ain't gettin' us nowhere. We come up the trail just now. The bushwacker didn't pass us. Any of you see sign of him?"

"No."

The long-nosed cowboy's answer was short, but his brown eyes were inquisitive. At his gesture the other cowboys got down, and one of them drew a slicker over the dead man.

"If you're Dean Mallotte that was Ben's friend," said Tom, "you'll be from Nueces County, Texas. I've heard Ben say you was bred neighbors down there, and done your first brush poppin' for the Lazy J outfit, under Sam Jordon. That right?"

Mallotte smiled his sleepy smile and his drawl was chill. "Not quite. It was Refugio County, and Starr Jennings was boss of the Lazy J."

The Tres Alamos cowboy holstered his gun and thrust out his hand. "Ben was expectin' you. He was a friend of mine, too, Mallotte!"

They gripped hands, and in that grip each found in the other something worth while. Clovis turned abruptly and instructed one of his companions to head for Twin Peaks.

"Report this to the law, Bill. Not that it will do any good, but Don Joe would want it done. Shorty—"

"Hold on," Mallotte interposed. "Before there's too much messin' around done, it might be a good idea to move slow and careful. No need to delay sendin' to town, but the rest of you stay put while I look around."

He paid as little heed to a sniff from Conny as to the expression which flashed across Tom Clovis's keen brown face. It did not occur to him that his assumption of authority might be presumptuous. The catching of this particular killer seemed to be his personal

obligation; besides, he was trained and experienced as a lawman. So, with calm assurance, he proceeded to look around. He back-trailed Coryell's horse for a distance. Then, returning, he looked again at the wounds which had caused his friend's death, and finally he examined the dead man's gun.

"I suppose," said Conny tartly, "the mystery is now solved. Ben is dead. He fired his gun in defending himself. From the hoof-prints of his horse you could identify the killer—if only he hadn't got away!"

One of the cowboys coughed. Mallotte looked at the girl, wondering why she should so strongly dislike him.

"There's no need for you to wait any longer, ma'am," he said quietly. "You'll want to get into dry clothes. Better take a couple of these boys with you, and send back a wagon."

"You find anything?" asked Clovis.

"I told you what he found," snapped Conny.

Mallotte met the stormy glance of her splendid eyes, marked the rebellious color in her cheeks that made her dangerously beautiful. He could not trust himself to speak. Turning away, he went to his horse and began to draw up the saddle cinch. Nor did he look around when, a few moments later, a stir of hoofs announced the girl's departure with two cowboys as her escort. He straightened and was watching the cowboy jog along the back trail toward Twin Peaks, when Clovis joined him.

"You seem to have a way with the ladies," said Clovis dryly. "She's takin' orders, which is plumb remarkable. Likewise, she's as close to cryin' as I've ever saw her—which is somethin' else."

"Huntin' killers is a man's job," Mallotte retorted. "As for cryin'— Well, she's a headstrong filly and it might do her some good."

He failed to note the queer glance Clovis gave him. At the rim of the canyon the cowboy messenger had drawn rein and another rider, coming up out of the canyon, pulled up beside him. Mallotte rubbed his chin. Clovis followed his steady look and came to attention. But when he spoke, the cowboy's brown face was without expression and his comment was rather casual.

"King Bishop is one hombre that don't believe in lettin' the grass get ahead of him."

There was something in that comment that caught Mallotte's interest.

"Your friend forks a likely horse," he drawled.

"Did I say he was my friend?" Clovis spat and added: "He don't nowise share your views about Miss Conny. He'll be on his way to spend the evenin'."

That was a remarkably complete statement, it seemed to Mallotte. His attention came to an even sharper focus upon the man who was now coming toward them, riding a slim-legged, long-barreled black stallion, whose sleek hide was mud spattered and flecked with slobber from a tender mouth.

"Clovis! What's this Willis tells me? Coryell shot? That's terrible!"

The voice was deep and resonant, assured. While Clovis answered, Mallotte continued to study King Bishop, perplexed by the feeling that somewhere, a long time ago, he had seen the man before. He was a big man, splendidly proportioned, powerful. His face was ruggedly handsome, ruddy complected; if his lips were a bit too full, his jaw and chin were solid enough to compensate. His hair, as tawny as a lion's mane, was as full of virility.

"Reckon I've never seen a handsomer man," Mallotte thought. "Who does he remind me of? Huh! Can't tie it down."

Vexed with himself, teased by that vague sense of recognition, he suddenly realized that Tom Clovis was introducing them.

"Mallotte, this is King Bishop. He's a prominent business man in Twin Peaks."

Mallotte met the straight, hard glance of clear blue eyes, and made no effort to shake the hand that was not extended toward him. It came to him forcibly that Bishop did not share his uncertainty. The man recognized him. But even as this conviction took possession of him the glint in the blue eyes was gone, and the tawny-haired man shook his handsome head and spoke regretfully in his deep, smooth voice.

"This must be a hard blow, Mallotte. Too bad it had to happen, especially at the very hour of your arrival. You're on a vacation of some sort, too, aren't you? Too bad! Too bad!"

Mallotte's eyes narrowed the least bit. He took note of Clovis's swift side glance, thought he detected a certain inquisitiveness behind King Bishop's query. His reply was deliberately complete.

"It ain't a vacation, Bishop. I've had my fill of lawin' down in Texas. Turned in my badge befo' I left. This country appealed to me when I came up here a couple of years back on Ranger business. Me and Ben was figgerin' to build us a brand. Seems like I'd have to go it alone now."

His cool drawl dipped into a moment of silence. The black stallion chomped and pawed. Mallotte's roan, standing beside the trail, sneezed gustily, flattened its ears and reached out to nip the rump of the mare whose tail swished too near. Regathering storm clouds drifted across the sun, casting a chill gray shadow upon the rain-soaked earth.

"Too bad," King Bishop repeated. And then, lifting his reins, he said: "Another shower coming, I'm afraid. You'll be at Tres Alamos this evening, Mallotte? Perhaps I can advise you in regard to finding a ranch site. I'm rather well acquainted with the range hereabouts."

"Obliged," said Mallotte. "Before you go, you didn't happen to see a gent hustlin' away from here as you come along, travelin' toward Twin Peaks, mebbe?"

King Bishop shook his head. "I saw no one on the trail. You mean that the man who shot Coryell may have ridden that way?"

He seemed surprised. Mallotte shrugged.

"*¿Quien sabe?*"

The blond man eyed him briefly, then lifted his hand with a curt nod that included Clovis. The black stallion jumped, mud spattered as it broke away at a fast lope.

Mallotte wiped a gob of wet adobe clay off his cheek, turned his head toward Tom Clovis's profane grumble. Afterward it seemed to him that something passed between them then, wordless and intimate, that marked the beginning of their friendship.

"Well," said Clovis irritably, "you've explained yourself and you've met up with the comin' big man of this range. Mebbe now we can do us some killer-trailin'. Unless you've changed your mind."

"Fork your horse," Dean Mallotte drawled.

Clovis grunted, wheeled and stalked to Ben Coryell's horse. The remaining Tres Alamos cowboy was instructed to stand guard over the dead man and his own horse and Mallotte's mare, until the wagon came from the ranch.

They followed the trail in the direction of the ranch, where the hoof-prints of the horses ridden by Conny and her escort lay over the prints of a single horse that had traveled in the opposite direction. Back-tracking this horse made evident variations in its gait. Walking when Coryell had fallen from the saddle, it had in turn trotted, loped and run. Some seventy-five yards north of the spot where Coryell lay, the horse had jumped off to the east of the trail, crashed through a clump of sage, and from that point had bolted back into and down the trail. Mallotte turned the roan sharply west from the broken sage-brush.

"If there'd been anybody over here, we'd of spotted him," said Tom Clovis. "The five of us was spread out some,

hunting stray broomtails. We covered a deal of ground."

"A horse," said Dean Mallotte, "don't jump toward the sound that scares it."

They rode on, slowly, toward the rise over which Mallotte had watched the five cowboys sweep down upon him a little while ago. They came to the piled-up boulders. They found where a horse had stood. They followed the double line of its tracks, approaching and departing from the high ground. A hundred and fifty yards they backtracked that horse, and lost the sign of it under a mass of hoof-prints, where a band of ponies had raced along on a roughly diagonal course, bearing from the northwest to the southeast.

"An ol' dodge with new trimmin's," drawled Mallotte, while Clovis rubbed his long nose and swore. "I'll bet you two bits some of you boys looked plumb at that bushwhacker and never saw him."

"It ain't possible!" Clovis declared. "By damn, it just ain't! I saw them broomtails stampedin', shore. But there wasn't no rider trailin' 'em."

"In amongst 'em," said Mallotte. "A-holdin' to the side of his critter. Travelin' like Ol' Nick had him by the tail, ridin' a barefoot hoss."

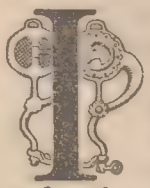
As he spoke a thunder clap made both horses jump. A moment later a rain drop the size of a quarter splashed over his saddle horn. It was raining hard by the time they reached the rim of the canyon, where the hoof-prints of the horse band ended at an outcropping of bed rock. A few of the horses could be seen, grazing north away from the edge of the canyon.

"Once he got this far," muttered Clovis, "he was safe. There's half a dozen steep trails over within half a mile, and all kinda hide-outs in this canyon."

Mallotte rode a short distance along the rim, and was forced to agree. The killer had made good his escape. Reluctantly Clovis and Dean turned back.

CHAPTER IV

El Rancho de los Tres Alamos



"IT IS unquestionably true," said Don José MacDaniel. "There is an organized band of ruffians at work here in the mountains. Rustling, highway robbery, murder and other lawlessness have become epidemic."

The young master of Tres Alamos Rancho stood with his back to the low burning fire, his hands clasped behind him. Physically MacDaniel—Don Joe, to his cowboys—bore slight resemblance to his sister. Mallotte had found him something of an enigma. A conservative estimate placed his age at not far from thirty. He was little above average in height, inclined toward stockiness, with wide, rather heavy shoulders. His very black hair was already sprinkled with silver, and his gray eyes were startlingly pale in contrast to the swarthiness of his complexion. They were thoughtful eyes, the eyes of a student; and yet, at odd moments they possessed the keenness of a surgeon's lancet.

"And you reckon Ben had a run-in with some rustlers," said Mallotte. "Mebbe so. Only it probably was one rustler, which don't look like a gang to me. Likewise"—he hesitated, then went on doggedly—"I've got a feelin' you're holdin' something back, suh. Rustlers ain't a mystery. But this whole layout looks queer."

Don Joe looked at him speculatively and a little grimly.

"It does look queer," MacDaniel admitted. "The more so when you understand that none of the gang has ever been identified. Ben, I think, had some sort of a hunch he was following up. Perhaps it brought him too close to some important discovery."

A short silence built up. Mallotte rubbed his chin. Mystery got under his hide. His every effort to bring about a naming of names, to get from anyone a definite statement even of sus-

picion, led to the same dead-end of evasion or outright silence. Impatient of mysteries, he sensed in this one something ugly and furtive, was aware as he had been before, while standing beside Coryell's dead body, of the gray shadow of dreadful uncertainty that seemed to lie upon the range and its people. There was the scent of treachery in the air. Here at Tres Alamos Rancho it should be different, for here was permanence, a long heritage of security, a tradition of loyalty between owner and employees. But it wasn't different.

"Names bein' p'ison thataway"—his drawl was slow, soft and cold—"I'll take a chance and call one—Creede. A tall gun-slinger with a scar on his cheek and hell in his eyes. Where might he fit into the deal?"

Don Joe teetered on his heels, frowning at the play of the firelight and shadows on the wall opposite. It was growing dark outside. Rain slithered and drummed against the windows of the room which was a combination of library and office; a long, narrow room, with solidly filled book shelves along two inner walls. Its furnishings included an enormous flat-topped desk and half a dozen leather upholstered arm chairs; a brightly colored Navajo rug covered the floor; above the fireplace hung a realistically mounted grizzly bear head. Indian relics ornamented the tops of the book shelves. There was a substantial iron safe in one corner, a rack of firearms in another. It was a man's room.

"And the boss of this outfit is just as hard to figure out," Mallotte thought.

"Creede!" MacDaniel repeated the name presently with a kind of reluctance. His frowning glance veered from shadow patterns to Mallotte's face, held there thoughtfully. "So you've met the gentleman, eh?"

That was all. Again Don Joe's heavy shoulders lifted in his characteristic Latin shrug. And again Mallotte felt his nose bump up against a solid wall of reticence and evasion. Plainly, however, it did not satisfy the young cowman to name Ike Creede leader of the lawless element that was putting a sort of blight on the mountain country.

"Which," Mallotte reflected, "is something to pause and consider. Any outfit in which Creede plays second fiddle must surely have a top-hand for a boss!" Aloud, he said, "Creede couldn't of had a personal hand in wipin' out Ben. He was on the trail ahead of me today, and his sign pointed on toward Twin Peaks."

Don Joe regarded him keenly but made no comment. Clovis leaned forward and drew the head of a match underneath the top of the desk. Somewhere in the house a piano was playing softly, an oddly poignant melody then blended with the sound of the storm outside. Music that sobbed and wailed. Mallotte shifted uneasily, wondering if Conny had a sister; an older sister; one gentler and kinder and not at all a firebrand.

"What's the law doin'?" he asked.

MacDaniel moved his heavy shoulders. "Not much. Until the gold strike, this country was thinly populated and peaceful. There wasn't even a deputy sheriff stationed at Twin Peaks. The county seat is two hundred miles away. There has been talk of organizing a new county here, but nothing has been done as yet. Everyone is too busy. And with an average of one killing a night at Twin Peaks, who can get excited about what happens out here?"

Mallotte's smoky eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"Seems like when three men have been killed it was time somebody got excited sort of," he drawled. "You said Ben was number three, didn't you?"

MacDaniel looked at him. "Don't misunderstand, Mallotte. As far as Tres Alamos is concerned, I try to protect my men. The boys ride armed, with orders to shoot first and argue last with strangers. I've called upon the sheriff to act. I'm responsible for a deputy United States marshal being assigned to this district, with headquarters at

Twin Peaks. There also is a town marshal, whose powers have been widened to include those of a deputy sheriff. The killing of Ben Coryell is being reported to these officers. If you or Tom, here, had found any clue or sign that could be run down, I'd have every available man on the job right now, storm or no storm."

It was a fair, frank statement to which no one could take exception. On the hearth Don Joe teetered on his heels, hand clasped behind him, head thrust forward, a solid bulk of a man who was, Mallotte opined, not to be easily swayed or stampeded into impulsive action. He found himself liking Don José MacDaniel. He found himself understanding, now that it no longer mattered, why Ben Coryell had been so reluctant to quit the Tres Alamos in favor of a partnership in a brand of their own.

And then he found himself listening to the song of the piano in the other part of the house, finding in it something that held him spellbound. Alternately sad and gay, the melody played upon the heartstrings of a man who knew little of music.

"I keep forgetting," said MacDaniel gently. "I've lost a friend and a trustworthy employee, but you have lost a partner."

Mallotte didn't say anything. With a crashing discord, the song of the piano ended. He stood up, turned and threw his cold cigarette into a receiver on the desk. Tom Clovis cleared his throat.

"Will you change your plans now?" asked Don Joe. "Or perhaps I might change them for you. I can use—"

"I'm obliged, suh. But I made my plans regardless of whether Ben strung along with me or stayed with you. Likewise, it seems now—"

The door at the end of the room opened. Mallotte's mind went blank with shock. He heard without hearing the husky sweetness of a remembered voice.

"He's a very stubborn man, Joe. Don't try to argue with him. It's even worse than debating with a balky burro."

It couldn't be Conny! Conny was a hoyden with flame-colored hair and mud on her nose, a young Amazon in man's clothing. This was a tall young woman, clad marvelously in something gossamer that swirled and foamed about her splendid body, its pale blue coloring bringing out the smooth bronze of arms and cheeks, the living flame in the neatly coiled and demurely restrained hair. Don Joe's quiet chuckle was the reality that drew him back to solid earth. His feet were planted there securely by glimpsing, just then, behind the girl, the shadowy figure of a man in motion, outside the door in the comparative darkness of the gallery.

"You're not being insulted, Mallotte," said MacDaniel. "You must have curbed this sister of mine in a desire to do something she wanted to do. Else you would not have been granted the distinction of such high standing in the animal kingdom. Oh, is that you, Bishop? Come in. I didn't—"

"Conny—duck!"

Bishop came in. He came with a yell and a rush, a lunging leap with arms outstretched, hurling himself bodily upon the girl who, as her brother spoke, moved and halted in a direct line between the door and the rain-swept windows at Mallotte's back. Mallotte's reactions were not the result of conscious thought; they were the reflexes of a man trained to instant response to emergency. He was whirling, weapons in his hands, when the blasting impact of a gunshot rocked the house.

CHAPTER V

"Don't Go Soft on Me!"

PETE NORTON, Tres Alamos foreman, was a gaunt and grizzled man whose long, sad face was adorned with stringily dejected mustaches of tobacco-tinted gray. There was mud on his boots and water dribbled off the lop

brim of his hat to make a small pool on the Navajo rug.

"It was a grub-line rider that drifted in just ahead of the last shower," he explained. "Bummed me fer a meal and a shake-down. A stranger which none of the boys recollects havin' saw before."

"And won't again," snapped Don Joe. "Since he got away on one of the fastest horses in my private string, with enough start to serve his purpose on such a night."

He teetered on his heels, standing on the hearth in his characteristic pose, hands clasped behind his back. He looked even more worried than displeased, and with it all wore the shocked appearance of a man who has suffered a severe blow to his pride. It was a serious matter for a guest at Tres Alamos to become the victim of murderous assault.

"Tom and the boys is doin' what they kin," mumbled Norton.

Mallotte's drawl was soothing. "Better call the boys in, I'd say. This rain'll wash out horse tracks faster'n they're made, even if it wasn't too dark now to see 'em."

Don Joe looked at him. "If you hadn't been mighty quick that bullet would have gone through your head."

"Oh, no," said Conny. "It was bound to glance. Or flatten."

Mallotte grinned. A gunshot had been fired into the room, through a window which had been eased open without attracting anyone's attention. But that and the ensuing excitement had not sufficed altogether to revive Mallotte from the shock of this new aspect of the hoyden with the hair of flame. He would be a long time remembering the touch of her fingers when she dressed the bullet scratch along his cheek-bone. Then she had been gentle, almost tender.

"A hard head has its points," he admitted. "But it was Bishop's yelp that saved my life. Mebbe some day I can return the favor, Bishop."

The blond man, who had said very little since hurling himself through the door to shield the girl with his own body and carry her out of the direct line of fire, smiled gravely.

"Don't let any sense of obligation trouble you, Mallotte. It was very simple. I happened to glance at that open window, saw the man there with a gun in his hand, and yelled."

"And proceeded to come down on me like a mad bull," put in Conny. "I haven't been so squashed since that Dynamite horse rolled on me."

But the look she gave King Bishop was something else. Mallotte turned his head and spoke to Don Joe.

"It's plain I was the target that hombre aimed to hit. Which makes the whole business, like Bishop says, plumb simple. I've had to jail a right smart assortment of two-legged varmints for various misdeeds. This, more'n likely, was one of 'em. We're all of us obliged to Bishop for gettin' Miss Conny out of the path of that bullet."

Don Joe, plainly, wanted to believe this. His dark face showed it, although in meeting his eyes for an instant Mallotte saw that he was not wholly convinced. But Don Joe turned and spoke quietly to his waiting foreman, gave instructions for recalling the cowboys who were attempting to trail the would-be killer. Norton, looking so inutterably sad as caused Mallotte to wonder what he found in life worth the living, made his dripping departure. A few seconds later a Chinese houseboy, moving without sound on thick-padded soles, appeared at the room door.

"You will be our house guest, Mallotte," said Don Joe. "For as long as you care to remain with us. Your room is ready, if you care to clean up a bit before supper."

Somehow Mallotte had not counted on this. He would have preferred to put in with Tom Clovis and the cowboys in one of the bunkhouses, eating and sleeping with the crew. He was about to say as much when he discovered Conny's amused glance upon him. His lips tightened. There was a mali-

cious glint in her dark eyes that brought hot blood into his thin cheeks. Perhaps, he thought, she thinks it will be fun to watch me eat peas off my knife.

"That's right nice of you," he drawled. "I could use some soap and water."

When he left the room, he carried with him two vivid mental pictures. Conny had moved beside her brother, her hand tucked under Don Joe's arm. As they stood so, the contrast between them was striking. They differed utterly in coloring and feature; the man was stocky, the girl looked slender in her gossamer blue gown, and was almost as tall. Yet no one who looked at them, it seemed to Mallotte, could doubt their kinship.

The other picture he carried with him was less confusing. It was of a blond giant whose height topped his own by a full three inches. In the brief meeting of their eyes as he crossed the room, something had sprung into existence, something primitive and powerful and peculiarly disturbing to Mallotte, who was not given to arriving at conclusions through emotional reaction.

He told himself, while he washed and donned a clean shirt and neckcloth, that there was neither rhyme nor reason to it. Bishop had no cause either to like or to dislike him. It was impossible that they should have met before today, impossible that he should have forgotten the circumstances of a previous meeting. Bishop wasn't the kind of a man to be forgotten. Who was it that he resembled? Someone, surely. That had to be it. Irritation welled up in Mallotte at his inability to dig out of his memory a satisfactory answer to the puzzle which haunted and perplexed him. His instinctive distrust of Bishop was an added irritant.

Seated on the edge of the bed, he rolled himself a cigarette, lighted it, puffed, and thoughtfully blew a smoke ring toward the ceiling. His head ached and he felt peculiarly dragged out, spent and weary. King Bishop had saved his life. He couldn't get around that fact. But neither could he get around a certain impression that stood up, stark and bare, amid a jumble of other impressions that were vague and confusing. He'd seen Bishop's face as the man plunged through the door and hurled himself at Conny MacDaniel. He'd seen it drained of its normal ruddy coloring, gray white and distorted more by anger than by fear.

"Hell," he said aloud, flipping the butt of his smoke into a receptacle near the wash-stand. "I'm gettin' plumb spooky!"

To make it certain, he jumped as if pin-pricked at a tap on the door and was on his feet, reaching for a gun, when Tom Clovis looked in at him. Vexedly he pocketed his left hand, rubbed his right against his nose. Clovis eased into the room and put his back against the door. His boots and hat were wet, but he'd laid off his slicker and without saying anything his fingers found papers and tobacco sack.

"Thought you was ridin' around in the rain," said Mallotte.

"It's stopped rainin'," said Clovis. "But it's still sort of wet. How long you had the habit of talkin' to yourself?"

Mallotte swore, and then he grinned. "Hunker down," he invited. "I'm acquirin' new habits plumb rapid in this country. You catch up with the fugitive?"

"That ain't what I'd call him," growled the cowboy. "No, we didn't catch him. He could spread out on the mud and sink out of sight anywhere. And it's as black out yonder as the inside of a—uh!—of Bishop's black hoss."

"Bishop," murmured Mallotte.

Clovis looked at him, walked over to a chair near the window and sat down. Mallotte lowered himself again to the edge of the bed.

"That," said Clovis, "might of been one of them figgers of speech. Here's somethin' that ain't. Norton an' two or three of the boys had a fair look at

the fella that stole Don Joe's pet hoss."

He was very casual about it. To hear him tell it, the only crime perpetrated was the theft of the horse. But Mallotte was not deceived, he waited at full attention.

"Accordin' to Shorty Benton," Clovis continued, "the said hoss thief bears a marked resemblance to a sidewinder which goes under the name of Laredo Jones and is a sort of special pal of Ike Creede. But Shorty didn't see him up close, and he ain't exactly a friend of this Jones hombre, and he's one of them imaginative cusses to boot. So it's more'n likely Mister Laredo Jones has been in Twin Peaks all day sleepin' off a hang-over. He couldn't of gunned out Ben Coryell, and he couldn't of bounced a slug off your remarkable thick head."

"No," said Mallotte.

A little spell of silence built up. Heels clicked along the tiled gallery outside the door. It seemed to Mallotte that he could hear the gurgle of the fountain that played in the patio. Then the clanger of an iron triangle at the cook shack rolled out sonorously through the dripping quiet and darkness of the early evening.

"Mebbe," suggested Clovis, "if you aim to linger in this country and preserve your health, you better get the habit of keepin' your back covered."

He stood up and walked to the door, halted there with his hand on the latch. Mallotte didn't say anything. His face was as blank as a slab of granite, but his smoky eyes glowed.

Clovis lifted the latch, lowered it and shoved the door tightly shut again. Then, with his back against it, he said very quietly: "Somethin' had been frettin' Ben for quite a spell. I asked him about it a couple of days ago. He said it was somethin' you and him could work out, after you got here. I'm tellin' you just in case—" He shrugged. "Well, it might tie up somewhere."

Mallotte nodded. "It might. If I knowed what was frettin' Ben. But anyhow, *gracias.*"

Clovis looked at him for a moment. Then turned and went out of the room. Mallotte stared thoughtfully at the closed door. A few minutes later he found Don Joe, Conny and King Bishop waiting for him in the great living-room.

"You look," said Don Joe, "as if you could use a drink. Head ache?"

Mallotte admitted that it did. Conny, sipping something from a tall glass, smiled maliciously.

"Where there's feeling there's bound to be some sense," she murmured. "Cheer up!"

He restrained an impulse to retort in kind, wondering at her adeptness in stirring him to anger. And then, having downed the stiff drink MacDaniel poured for him, when he looked at her again and found her dark eyes grave at once he was caught in the same kind of spell that had gripped him when he had seen her before. Once again he seemed to be standing at the sheer edge of a lonely precipice, with the wind rushing about him, with the pull of empty space below him and the vast reach of the bare cold sky above.

"Suppeh, leddy," announced the Chinese houseboy.

"And can I do it wrong," grinned Conny, jumping to her feet.

She linked her hand through King Bishop's arm and led the way out of the room. Mallotte came to earth.

On guard and keenly observant during the meal and the evening that followed, he sensed that something of vital importance was likely to happen at any moment. But if the others were aware of this, they gave no sign of tension. And nothing of consequence did happen. Don Joe was quietly friendly. A man not habitually talkative, he showed himself to possess a store of knowledge that covered a surprising range. Mallotte, speaking seldom and then only in answer to direct questions, for the most part flung at him at unexpected moments by Conny, felt his initial liking for the young heir of Spanish dons and Irish adventurer take firm

root. Toward King Bishop he endeavored to hold an open mind. But he was not sorry when, late in the evening, Bishop prepared to ride away on the nervous black stallion one of the cowboys brought around for him. They all went out into the patio together, and stood at the wide gate.

"When you hit Twin Peaks, Mallotte, be sure to look me up," said the big blond man. "I may know of something to your interest."

"Obliged," murmured Mallotte.

They shook hands carefully. Bishop's grip was firm and strong, as frank and positive as the man himself seemed to be. Mallotte wondered at the dislike that had strengthened its hold on him during the evening. He watched Don Joe bid his guest good-by. He watched Bishop take Conny's extended hand and lift it gallantly to his lips and murmur something inaudible to other ears that deepened the rich color in the girl's cheeks.

Then, standing back a little from the brother and sister, he watched King Bishop vault into the saddle, hold a hard hand on the curb bit while the black stallion reared and pawed under prodding spurs. He was glad when the show ended with the horse bolting away into the darkness.

Overhead a few pale stars peeped through rifts in the breaking storm clouds. The wind had veered to blow softly out of the south, and the scent of spring was very strong in the moist warm air. The stallion's hoofs clattered and drummed a rapid cadence that faded into the hush. Conny sighed and her cheek touched her brother's shoulder.

"Getting another romantic streak?" Don Joe's voice, though quiet, held a peculiar edge that made Mallotte abruptly ill at ease. "I might perhaps advise—"

"You might mind your own business, Joe!"

The girl's retort was prompt, tart. She was instantly erect and standing away from him, all her softness was gone and in its stead was the headstrong wilfulness that seemed to be her predominant characteristic. Mallotte's embarrassment was enhanced by the suspicion that they had forgotten him.

"It's what I'm trying to do," said Don Joe steadily. "You're old enough to know the danger of playing with fire."

In spite of the awkwardness of his position as an unintentional witness, Mallotte's sympathies were strongly with the brother of the hoydenish firebrand. The girl needed discipline. She was as wild and full of hell as an untamed colt, and as liable to stampede into serious trouble out of sheer perversity. He cleared his throat, and caught the flash of her eyes as her face turned toward him.

"I'll play with what I like, Joe, and you'll not stop me. Perhaps we can amuse our guest by putting on a good old-fashioned family row. Drag out all our skeletons and dust them off. Show him—"

Don Joe wheeled and went into the house without a word. It was dignified flight, not rudeness. Mallotte understood and yearned to slap some of the nonsense out of the spit-cat. He'd hate to have her for his sister, although if she were his sister—

"Go ahead and say it! I'm an unspanked brat that needs to be taught manners!"

Mallotte looked at her. The light from the open door spilled across her face, showing the strong, clean line of the throat and chin, the proud lift of her head. In that moment it seemed to him that he gained a peculiarly deep and intimate understanding of her nature. He took a deep breath. When he spoke, his voice was very gentle.

"I'm gettin' to know you better, ma'am!"

Surprisingly, she turned on him with a kind of fury.

"Don't you go soft on me, you—you Texan!"

The way she affected him was something he could never understand. His temper flamed to meet hers. When she

swayed there before him, her eyes blazing, her cheeks hot, he stared down at her as he would have stared at an angry man. And the lamplight washed across his face, too, showed it to be stern and somehow ageless, with deep lines etched about the lips and eyes, with a solid jaw and chin that might have been carved from granite and seemed indeed to possess the hardness of the stone.

"No," he said evenly. "That's somethin' I'd never do, *Señorita* Consuelo!"

CHAPTER VI

Twin Peaks

BEN CORYELL was buried at noon the next day. The storm having spent its force during the night, a warm spring sun looked down from clear skies upon the ranch folk who gathered on the west facing hillside, where for generations Tres Alamos Rancho had buried its dead. The law was not present, word having been brought back from Twin Peaks by the rider Tom Clovis sent from the scene of the killing, that it might be a day or two before the overworked town marshal and deputy sheriff could get away. There would be no inquest, it appeared, since the coroner was at the county seat, two hundred miles away, and never interested himself in happenings so remote. Mallotte had encountered such conditions elsewhere. He was not surprised.

"These things make it apparent," said Don Joe, "that we must organize our own county government and separate ourselves from Canyon County."

It was Don Joe, clad in black broadcloth and white linen, who conducted the simple service beside the freshly dug grave. Cowboys with sober brown faces and tight lips lowered the rude coffin which held all that remained of the young horse foreman. Adobe mud thudded upon the pine box. A wailing cry arose from a dozen or so Mexican women, wives and daughters of the descendants of peons who had served the first MacDaniel and his Spanish bride. Mallotte, affected as he had seldom been in his hard lived life, drew his hand across his eyes that suddenly were blinded. And then, through a momentary hush, a single sob stood out. The sound of it went through him like a knife, yet somehow the stab of pain left behind it a tiny glow of warmth.

Once only since the service began had he looked at Conny, but he could see her plainly now without looking. Slim and tall in a plain black dress, she was no hoyden that day, no flippant firebrand. She was *Señorita* Consuelo Maria MacDaniel, grandchild of Old Spain, mistress of el Rancho de los Tres Alamos, a fine, sweet lady who wept for a man who had died in her service. . . .

Flashing shovels filled the grave. The little gathering broke up, scattered and drifted back down the sunny hillside. Life went on. Cowboys mounted and rode away; ranch workers went about their accustomed chores. The women returned to their baking and cleaning, washing and scrubbing. Half a dozen swarthy-skinned children, another generation sprung from the long departed peons, raced away whooping. Mallotte did not move. He watched the rounding mound of adobe clay, and presently he became aware of Tom Clovis standing beside him. He stirred then like a man waking from sleep. He sighed and drew his hat onto his head and reached for the makings.

"Sample mine," said Clovis gruffly.

They rolled cigarettes, shared a light, turned together silently down the hillside to waiting horses.

"I'll be headin' for Twin Peaks," said Mallotte as they rode at a walk along the muddy wagon road toward the ranch. "The sooner I get organized as a cow outfit, the better I'll like it. Seems I've let too much of my life get away from me without accomplishin' nothin'."

Clovis gave him a side glance, one eyebrow cocked. Most men who

had built up a reputation comparable to this young Texan's would have felt that they had accomplished a great deal. But the desire to be doing something could be understood by a man who was himself restless by nature, active, and uneasy in idleness.

"There's plenty of prime range close by," said Clovis.

The horses *clip-clopped* through a long moment while the silence between them was warm and friendly. Mallotte's liking for the brown-eyed, keen-witted cowboy had deepened steadily; he had found in Clovis the kind of companionship he valued most, the kind of which Ben Coryell had been capable. But the situation was a delicate one. He would no more have considered hiring away one of Don Joe's employees than he would have considered repaying hospitality by robbing the ranch safe.

"Should I find what I want, or somethin' near enough to do," he said slowly, "I've got a fair stake, and some credit, when it's needed. But buildin' a brand right is more'n a one-man job."

Again the *clip-clop* of the horses' hoofs ran through silence. In the ranchyard, not far ahead of them now, the rig in which Conny and Don Joe had driven to the hillside burial ground was wheeling to a stop. Near one of the corrals a number of ranch workers and cowboys were grouped about a horse.

"I'll think it over," said Clovis finally. "It sounds right interestin'."

A few minutes later, loping into the ranchyard, they saw Don Joe signal them and pulled over to the group near the corral. The horse which was the center of interest was a rangy sorrel, its coat matted with mud and drying sweat and water. It was saddled and Don Joe, his dark face sober and a puzzled gleam in his eyes, pointed silently to an ugly brownish smear that stained the leather.

"Blood," said Mallotte quietly.

"It was the horse that was stolen last night," said Don Joe. "Your shot must have been more accurate than you supposed."

Mallotte started to shake his head, checked himself instead and tightened his lips. It was possible, of course, that his snap shot had registered a hit, but he didn't believe it. Instead, an odd notion took hold of him. A notion of which, however, he made no mention.

Half an hour later he was ready to ride.

"Good ridin'," said Clovis, gripping his hand. "And keep your eyes peeled. I'll likely be in town tomorrow."

"¡Hasta la vista, amigo!"

The blue roan reared and whirled. The pack mare flattened her ears and broke into a lope, heading west. Mallotte had already said good-by to Don Joe. He knew that Conny was advised of his departure, but she had not spoken to him that morning. So now, riding past the sprawling adobe ranch house, he looked toward the gate that opened into the patio, hoping to catch some glimpse of her. But she did not appear.

The ranch fell behind long ground swells. He pushed on rapidly, anxious to reach Twin Peaks before nightfall. The mare shied away from the spot where Ben Coryell had lain dead, the roan stepped mincingly along the muddy trail which slanted down steeply from the rim of the valley. Crazy Horse Creek had reached new heights, a foaming yellow torrent that roared and thundered in its canyon bed.

"I wonder if she'd tackle that swim today?" Mallotte murmured, squinting smoky eyes against the misty glare at the upper crossing. "If she was so minded," he concluded, "nothin' would stop her."

His thought veered. It seemed to him of a sudden that his heretofore woman-free life was becoming cluttered with females. Well, with age creeping up on him—he'd be twenty-five at his next birthday—perhaps it was time to give some thought to choosing a wife. Having concluded that he couldn't delay much longer in settling

down to build himself a brand and a home, he perhaps should consider that the time had come also to contemplate marriage. He rubbed his chin, and felt confusion build up within him.

His pulse quickened at the prospect of seeing again the dark-haired, coquettish Gloria Ashley from Polk County, Missouri. But he couldn't entirely forget the flashing glance of stormy violet eyes, the sheen and warmth of flame-colored hair, the imperious tilt of a stubborn chin. . . .

Sight of a flimsy bridge across the raging creek aroused him to more practical considerations. The flood reached to within a foot of the bridge floor, and the mare displayed in order dubiousness, terror, and a stubborn determination to die in her tracks rather than transfer those tracks from mud to swaying timber. Dean Mallotte swore and dropped a loop over her stubborn head.

"You've lost your head plenty times befo'," he told her, "but this is shore goin' to be a permanent separation unless you get up off your tail."

The rope tightened, the mare's neck stretched. She came along. When on the other side of the bridge he shook off the rope, she trotted ahead along the wagon road as if that had been her intention all the time. Cresting a rise, he looked down upon Twin Peaks, sprawling like a bloated toad at the foot of the snow-capped mountains that gave it name.

Those high snow banks were blood red in the sunset when he rode along the one-time cow-town's main street. A tinge of coolness edged the warmth of the spring air. A freight outfit, three huge wagons each drawn by sixteen mules, rolled westward out of town. The street was lined with buckboards and spring wagons; every hitching-rail was crowded with rigs and runty cow-ponies. The plank sidewalks on either side carried as motley a throng as Mallotte had ever seen.

There were cowboys and mine muckers, mule skinners and game hunters, gamblers and tenderfeet and cold-eyed gunmen. There were Indians in varicolored blankets, swarthy Mexicans, Chinese; white men with pasty faces, others burned brown by wind and sun. A carriage rolled past, driven by a man in a derby hat, carrying as passengers two women with painted faces and short-skirted dresses that displayed much plump bare flesh. From open windows in two-story unpainted frame buildings other women leaned and shouted.

The voice of the town was a raucous, half maudlin bellow. Mallotte had a lead rope on the mare now, caught short as he stubbornly bucked the current of traffic on its determined course. Since his visit here everything had changed. He counted a dozen saloons where there had been but two or three. Tent houses reared alongside squat adobes. Hammers rang and saws rasped, adding to the din, where carpenters worked overtime. A huge sprawling frame structure, new since his time, housed the BONANZA GAMBLING SALOON AND DANCE PAVILION. Roulette wheels spun in tents where other tables lured men to faro and craps, to stud poker, blackjack and chuckaluck.

A mob swarmed in and out of Welch's General Store, and he wondered what old Pop thought of the new era. A man shoved out of the Last Chance Saloon, hurled a whiskey bottle high in the air and emptied a six-shooter at it. Every shot missed, but the falling bottle hit the wheel of a freight wagon and broke, and the marksman seemed satisfied.

"P'ison rotgut!" he howled. "Ain't fit fer white mansh to drink!"

But as he went on his way, Mallotte noted that the vociferous gent was beating his way back inside the saloon. And then, suddenly, the Texan's attention came to focus upon a knot of men who milled about the entrance of a small frame building, from inside of which came sounds of conflict. It was the drone of a remembered voice that

tightened his hand on the rein to stop the roan gelding.

"You ain't paid your tax, Ashley. Likewise, a journalist like you claim to be has gotta dance for the privilege of polutin' the air of Twin Peaks."

"Play music fer the perfessor, Ike!" yelled a drunken voice. "Make him hop it!"

Mallotte nosed the roan to the sidewalk, swung down and pushed into the crowd. Men swayed and shoved and held him back with their bodies. The calm, cultured voice of Philip Ashley reached his ears.

"You're not the tax collector, Creede. I have no more intention of contributing to your demands than I have of dancing—"

A gunshot boomed. The crowd howled approval. Mallotte was in the middle of the mass, elbowing his way expertly toward the door. He had done this sort of thing before. A fist swung at his jaw; he caught it, twisted until a yell of pain came from the victim. He drove the point of his elbow into a pot belly and a path cleared before him. He ducked through a door into a large, square room littered with crates, packing cases, newsprint paper. A partly assembled press loomed near a window. A type-case was overturned on the floor, and in front of it stood Philip Ashley, slender and erect in shirt-sleeved dignity.

There were a half-dozen leering ruffians in the room. Gun smoke flattened in air that stank of whiskey and sweat, of horse and printer's ink. Ike Creede, his feet set well apart and his hawk head thrust a little forward, leveled a sixgun in a negligent hand.

"Dance, Perfessor! You'll amuse us and pay up, or—"

As if some instinct warned him, he wheeled like a startled cat toward Mallotte.

The crowd at the door surged and scrambled back. The toughs in the room stood in stunned amazement. Above the scuffle and scrape of booted feet, harsh rasping breaths and muttered oaths, the solid smack of a blow stood out. Mallotte's left fist drove against Creede's lean jaw with terrific force. The man's hawk head snapped back, he swayed on his heel, his eyes glassy. The gun, gripped in his sagging hand, blasted a single shot into the floor. Then a jolting right under the heart lifted and hurled him bodily against the wall, where he sagged and began to slide down slowly.

Mallotte was beside the stunned man instantly, his wide back to the substantial wall, twin guns leveled in his hands. His smile was crooked and sleepy, his calm drawl dripped ice.

"The sky's the limit, gents! Grab for it!"

(*To be continued in the next issue*)

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Wasteland

By Clee Woods

Jessie lived intensely, was fierce in her loyalties, dauntless in her courage. But there came a time when she had to choose between loyalty and honor.

AT THE little yellow station house of Tres Aguas, Jessie made certain that the passenger train was due in twelve minutes. Then she trotted her white-stockinged sorrel down to the hitch-rack at one side of the bank.

She tied the hackamore strap to the pole in careless fashion and left the bridle reins hooked about the saddle horn. But the hackamore was cut near the ring, until only a tug would snap it. In nonchalant stride, she made for the bank. Her little head she proudly carried beneath its black, flat-crowned Stetson. But within that head chaos whirled. Plain hell it was. For she was going to rob the bank! Alone, too.

She had to do it, she vowed over and over to herself. Some day, somehow, she would pay it back, she promised her stinging conscience. But right now nothing less than a sheaf of cash would save her brother. In her fierce young heart at this moment, loyalty was beating down the cry of conscience.

Everything she did was with ardor and fire. Work, play, love, hate—all her life was intense and vivid. To the eye she was like a wild flower breaking forth from bud. In action she was more like flames lapping through the pines. Daughter of a fighting old cowboy who had built up a small herd at great odds, she was unlettered, wilful, primitive.

At the corner of the bank she suddenly pulled back, as if to set her Stetson more firmly against the wind whipping around the corner. The real reason was that she had caught sight of Len Noel across the street. Lithe, almost slim, not especially good looking, just a gray-eyed man's man, that was Len. He wore a brown sombrero, neat wool shirt, gray jeans tucked into high-topped boots. He was under

twenty-five perhaps, with a face cut square and clean.

Jessie wondered what he was doing here. She had danced with him only last night, up at Grayson's Siding. And liked him—until he made an awkward and finally successful effort to kiss her out on the back porch. Hours afterward, in her hectic dreams on the desert sands, his gray eyes had kept condemning her for the plans which just now she was putting into execution.

But neither dreams of him nor the man in flesh were going to stop her. Officers were looking for her brother Harry. Jessie had gone to the dance as a rank stranger, solely to find out what she could about the manhunt. The sheriff had ten men scouring mountains and canyons for him. And three deputies were on the open desert in a preliminary search of the wastelands. So, calling upon her last vestige of courage and recklessness, Jessie whipped around the corner.

Noel waved a genial hand to her and smiled. Jessie turned her head down against the wind and pretended not to see him. As she passed into the bank, the wind snatched the door out of her hand and banged it behind her. She jumped nervously and whirled about, as if fearful that some grim officer already had slammed a prison door behind her.

"Come on, Jeppy, buck up," she gave herself a mental reprimand, using her father's nickname for her.

Then she pulled a Bisel model Colt from the bosom of her blue flannel shirt and leveled it on the easy-going old cashier. The cow-country banker almost swallowed his big cud of tobacco. Then his kindly eyes smiled. He just could not believe what he saw. His bookkeeper stared in equal unbelief.

It was incredible. A mere strip of a girl, five feet tall and with a wasteline like a stalk of grain in the wind. A yellow silk neckerchief accentuated the contrast between her very fair skin and the dark luster of her hair. Her eyes were sky-blue; her face slim and altogether lovely. The tan on her small hands and the well worn state of her range garb marked her as a girl of the outdoors. Perhaps it was that impression of her belonging so fully to the West that finally made the cashier afraid she might use the sullen-nosed weapon pointing through the cage at them.

"Gimme the dough, fellers!" she bit out.

Her voice was tense. The gun was cocked. It did not tremble.

"Young lady," the cashier began, "surely you—"

"Gimme that money," Jessie cut in impatiently, "before I have to bust a wing for you!"

That sounded pretty salty. At the same time, her eyes were soft and young and altogether without sins. It was evident she had been shielded jealously from the bitter side of her father's struggle against Frontier enemies.

The smile on the cashier's face died. The bookkeeper grinned in sickly fashion.

"Mister," Jessie said regretfully to the young fellow, "you see I give this old goat plenty of warnin' a-fore I shoot 'im. But he was too greedy to live. Now here goes!"

She pushed the gun a little nearer, as if to pull the trigger. Both men cried out at the same time. The cashier began digging money from the till. Jessie's eyes widened. She had never dreamed of stacks of money like that. "Take it back—that sack, sir," she gulped. "This'll be enough for me."

Her left hand seized three packets of bills and thrust them into her shirt. Then she began backing for the door, gun on her victims. From far down the track came the train's whistle. She shoved her gun into her shirt, whirled and darted out.

And came face to face with Len Noel. She realized the moment her eyes flashed onto him that he knew what she had been about. His face was stern, sad. His eyes whipped onto the

bulge in her shirt. She saw that he was going to try to stop her. She simply could not be stopped. Couldn't fail Harry. Poor boy, lying out there wounded. No food; no medicine; water gone by now. And fearing capture every moment.

Her first frenzied thought was to smile up at Noel and throw him off his guard. But it wouldn't come. She just couldn't turn on a coquettish smile when nothing but desperation was in her heart. The bulge of the money seemed the size of a pumpkin to her. No use trying to deceive this guy anyway.

"Lou," he was saying—Jessie had given only her middle name at the dance —"I can't let you do this. But I'll be glad to lend you all the dough I got."

He must have seen her through the window while she had her gun on the bank people. Jessie's mind went numb in sheer desperation. She had never known such shame as now when his gray eyes bored down into hers. Robber! Thief! And he of all people to catch her at it.

Suddenly something within her snapped. She became all action. No thought but to get away; no care save to accomplish her mission for Harry. Like a rocket taking off, she lunged past him. An arm caught him about the waist. A leg hooked about his. Before he had time to realize what was happening, she was sending him crashing backward. She tore herself away from him and went darting for her horse.

But her feet slowed. Not because of danger. The cashier and bookkeeper hadn't yet emerged from the bank. Gasping people on the street hardly knew yet what it was all about. And young Noel had got a pretty severe bump when the back of his head hit the ground. He didn't seem able to rise yet.

Thief! Thief! Thief! That was what stopped her. The awful condemnation paralyzed her mind. She couldn't think of anything else. A robber. On the owl-hoot. Hunted like some common hold-up.

As suddenly as she had flown into Noel, she spun about and ran back to the bank door. The cashier was just emerging. She tore the money from her bosom and hurled it at him.

"I can't take that money!" she cried.

Again she made for the horse. Sawtooth spurs on the fancy-stitched boots gouged hard at the sorrel's ribs. The severed hackamore snapped. She sent the horse plunging down a narrow space between the bank and a hardware store. Even though she had given back all the money, they might want to throw her in jail as a dangerous character.

SHE CUT off toward the desert, and topped a low rise south of the little town. The passenger train was whistling for the station. A backward glance showed Jessie three men running to horses tied up the street. She swept on out of their view. She had planned this thing well. Southward the trail disappeared into endless waves of lomas or hills. Pursuers might hold on that trail for a mile before discovering that she had not made for the Mexican Border.

Jessie cut to her right and swept westward through a low stretch of cholla and yucca. Soon she was down in a dry wash. She held in this until she heard the puff of the locomotive pulling out of town. Then she angled back for the railroad. The train came on, roaring under a heavy load. On an uphill curve it was slowed to fifteen miles an hour.

Jessie sent her panting sorrel racing up beside the rear coach. The horse snorted, shied, broke away. She reined him close in to the rear platform, reached far out, grasped the handholds and took leave of the saddle. A brakeman, smiling, grasped her arm.

"Didn't have time to get to the station—so cut across to head you off," she explained.

Her heart was standing still. The train had made only a bare halt at Tres Aguas. Had any of the crew or passengers learned of the bank robbery in that brief time? At least this brakeman hadn't. Weak in the knees now for the first time in her life, Jessie went in and sat down. Nobody on the train knew! The conductor collected her fare with a joking remark about her manner of boarding the train.

She had got away. Everything had worked perfectly, except that she didn't have that precious money. Even if somebody behind had seen her board the train, they could not telephone ahead to Grayson's Siding. Just before daylight this morning, she had nipped the wire leading into Old Man Trumbull's store. The trouble might not be located for days. Trumbull's was the only telephone in the little place. Grayson's Siding was merely a flag stop, with no depot, sixteen miles ahead.

Without the money! That was the terrible part of it. She still had to get Harry into Mexico. Her brother had confessed to her that he was a wanted man across the Line also. But with as much as two thousand dollars he could buy a hiding place on the *rancho* of a crooked *sherife*. And it would take more money to get a doctor and other necessities. So they had to have not less than twenty-five hundred dollars. She couldn't let Harry down like this. There was only one thing left to do.

Go to Handsome John Wyatt. Marry him. The thought left her so cold she trembled from head to foot. That same thought was what had driven her finally to decide on holding up the bank. Big, fine-looking, this Handsome John had possessed three former wives of whom Jessie knew. He had beaten the Mexican mate until she died. Strangers had found the second, a white woman, dead in a deserted cabin far up in the mountains. But her ten-day-old baby lived. The third woman had shot him in the hip and managed to get out of the country.

But he had money just now. Probably hold-up cash. It was money, though, and Harry would dangle from a noose if he did not get money. A rope about Harry's neck; feet kicking convulsively; the rattle in his throat as his wind was cut off—a horrible thing to let happen to a brother.

Handsome John was a sort of eel-like outlaw on the loose, so far as officers were concerned. He had appeared without explanation at Harry's desert hide-out. In less than two hours he had come out with his proposal to the comely sister. Harry had driven him off with a gun. Poor, misguided Harry sure would stick up for her, at any rate. Unabashed and smiling, big Handsome John had gone his way.

But he had called back to Jessie, "Iffen yuh change yer mind, sister, I'll be hangin' out around Skull Spring."

That was twenty-odd miles south of Harry's hide-out, the next water hole on the way to Mexico. She would have time to think a great deal about the offer before she and Harry got to Skull Spring. Even in trying to fortify her mind for the trip to find Handsome John, Jessie caught herself in the traitorous hope that he would be gone.

"The brutish devil!" she shuddered inwardly. "I've got to—no, no, I can't do it! I can never do it!"

SO RAN her mad thoughts until the train left her on the cinders at Grayson's Siding. A bay horse and a big brown mule were hitched by Trumbull's store. The mule was packed with grub, water and ammunition, ready to go according to her orders. The only thing that remained was to pay Trumbull for both animals and supplies. She had told him she would be back on the train, with the money. He had refused her credit because she was a stranger and not well accounted for as yet.

Now what? No pleas would avail anything with the hard-headed old merchant. She had found that out yester-

day. But no scruples could stop her from getting water and food to Harry. Old Trumbull would have to wait for his pay whether he wanted to or not. She would pay later, even if it took Handsome John's cash to do it. One thing was in her favor. The wind here was blowing so hard and persistently that the sky was beclouded with dust. Her tracks would be sifted over with sand within half an hour, or even less.

She walked over to the mule and pretended to examine the animal and its load.

Slyly she cut the lead rope about the mule's neck so that the least pressure against it would cause it to fall off. The stooped Trumbull appeared on the store porch.

"That's old Punkey," Trumbull introduced mule and new owner.

A woman and her two children were the only customers about. The town consisted of nothing but the store and seven houses, three empty. There were no more than half a dozen men within five miles of here. Trumbull's customers and dance guests alike came from the ranches and mines in the Pintado Mountains north of the railroad.

Casually, in the store, Jessie asked questions about the mountain trails. She came back twice to the water and wild game of Big Piny creek, which drained the remote northern side of the Pintado range. Very soon a small boy came running in to say that the mule had broken loose. With an exclamation of concern, Jessie ran out. Punkey had crossed the railroad tracks, heading back to his mountain range.

"Excuse me, Mr. Trumbull," Jessie asked, and she was able to smile sweetly this time, "till I can haze that ornery mule back here."

She gigged the bay after Punkey. As soon as she had crossed the tracks, a deep voice greeted her from a reeking stable. Len Noel! He came walking out toward her.

"You! How did you get here?" Jessie flared at him.

"Rode in the engine cab."

"But—but how did you know I was going to make this train?"

"Yesterday Trumbull was too curious about your arrangements for the horse and pack critter. He asked me about it. That made me curious too. So I follered you to Tres Aguas. But I hadn't been able to figure out the rest till the train whistled right after you high-tailed it outa Three Waters."

"Are they going to run me down and throw me in jail?" she asked quickly.

"Hardly likely. You were too plumb genuine in turnin' back the dinero. So, knowin' how you'd waited an hour outside town before the almost robbery, I caught the train back to Grayson's Sidin', and got off on the blind side just now."

"All just to lend me some money, I suppose," Jessie headed him off.

Her eyes were beginning to light up in anger. Suspicion was written all over his actions, now that she would admit it to her thoughts. He was one of the officers after Harry! And he had tried to make love to her as a means of catching Harry. Within ten seconds she tried him and found him guilty on the charge, even while she was looking squarely into his earnest gray eyes. She would have to give him credit for being clever. But two could play at that game. She had scarcely heard his protestations of good intentions.

"Wait a minute till I get that mule turned," she requested. "I'm headin' south for the Mex Border, and even a big mule like him is goin' to need every ounce of reserve he has to cross that desert."

She knew that he would not believe her statement of direction if he were suspicious of her. Since she said it was the Mexican Border, he would think she was headed for the mountains. And her seemingly guarded questions to Trumbull about Big Piny Creek had been for the same purpose of throwing trailers off.

She urged her horse after the mule again. Overtaking Punkey, she lashed at him in what was intended to be a show of turning him. In reality, she

was driving Punkey on toward the mountains. The mule broke into a run. The store and Noel were half a mile behind when the wagon road dipped down into a shallow arroyo. She could not see the store for the dust. Now was the time.

She spurred in beside Punkey and dropped her loop about his neck. Then she cut out of the road. She took time, however, to leap off, seize a mesquite limb and brush out her tracks. The wind immediately began to smooth out the disturbed sand.

She took Punkey on a trot up the arroyo. The mule was broken to lead. Let Mr. Noel go hunting for her in the mountains. Indeed she was heading for the Mexican Border. And now, with visibility shortened to five hundred yards by the dust haze, she had small chance of running into the posse that was combing the country for Harry.

CAME eleven o'clock the next day. The dust storm had passed. The sun beat down mercilessly on the untracked waves of sand. Harry Hanna was riding the bay horse. Jessie held onto the horse's tail as she tramped. Her feet were blistered, her legs weary, her heart dead.

Punkey had broken away during the worst of the sand-storm in the night. Harry had to ride with what provisions they could carry, including two gallons of water. Harry was feverish from the bullet hole that cut the lower corner of his right lung.

Tramp, tramp, tramp. The heat became almost unendurable. Not even a breeze today. And it was three or four miles yet, maybe half a dozen, to Skull Spring. Jessie had given up in her heart. If they could only reach the tepid water of Skull Spring, she would surrender Harry and herself to Handsome John Wyatt. To hold out would mean death for Harry either from lack of medical care or on the gallows. She felt that she would be guilty of his death in either case. For Handsome John could run Harry through to Mexico and protection. She could not. That was all there was to it.

Right now they could not go another quarter-mile through the blaze of sun. The horse would die under Harry. Both of them were risking a sun stroke. Jessie turned off to a comb of whitish rock that would afford a little shade. She settled Harry, and then went up onto the sandy swell of ground to scan the desert for pursuers.

All at once she slid down low behind an outcrop of rock. Something had moved on the next swell of ground. She peered up cautiously. Len Noel again! He was afoot. And from the way he walked, the trek had taken a great deal out of him. He was plodding, slowly, unsteadily, but with determination. She knew he was after Harry. He had guessed the ultimate course she must take, and then hit on the trail of the returning Punkey. Now he was crossing to her ridge, as if he had located his quarry.

She wanted to turn him back without Harry's knowing it. She therefore crawled toward Noel a little, and halted behind a hummock of sand lodged about a dwarfed Joshua tree. He came on within six-shooter range. His face was sweat-streaked; his shirt caked with sweaty salt and alkali. Jessie pulled her head down and depended on sound for her cue to bob up with her gun on him.

"Better let him get to ten yards of me," Jessie steeled herself with thought. "Then I can't shake so bad I'll miss—if I have to shoot."

Even as she formed the desperate resolution, the tread of his boots ceased. The whole world seemed to stand still in a deadly silence. The desert, the sun, the blue sky—all were silent.

Then his voice, "Lou, you forgot to pull your tracks into your cover with you."

Jessie started. So she had forgotten the trail she'd made crawling here. Stupid. She lifted her head up to face him, expecting a gun to cover her. He

did not offer to touch the gun on his hip. But it seemed foolish of him, in view of her actions and his next declaration, "I reckon you know by now why I'm trailin' you."

"Yes," she snapped back at him. "And also why you tried to—to—make love to me. I hate the very ground you walk on, Noel!"

He looked distressed. "I was powerful afraid you would," he admitted. "But that don't let me off from arrestin' Harry Hanna. I reckon you know what he's wanted for."

"Robbing a cattle buyer," she admitted.

"More than that," Noel informed her. "He killed a clerk while robbin' a post-office. I'm a U. S. deputy marshal."

"He never told me about the post-office and—and— Well, I don't believe it."

"Plumb straight, though. They identified some of the money he paid a doctor to fix 'im up, before he hit for home and dragged you into it. Now you're layin' yourself liable to the Federal pen for helpin' him get away. Besides, I've seen your dad at the ranch. He's worried sick about you. He owns up that Harry ain't worth what you're doin' for 'im."

"I don't care, I'm stickin' by Harry."

Before Noel answered, he came up and sat down on the rock. She backed away a few steps. He looked at her a long time before he replied, and then he used her correct name to show that he knew more about her than she had supposed.

"I feared you'd feel thataway. But you got too much good in you, Jessie. And—and as for—for—that kiss back at Trumbull's—"

He was groping for words, and deadly in earnest. Jessie felt a strange catch in her throat. A wild, tumultuous thing suddenly beat in her breast. She was remembering that kiss he had taken, and the dreams she had had about it. But she tried to smother such feelings. She had to hate this man-hunter.

"I meant it," he finished his embarrassed avowal. "I shore did, girl. Jeppy, I love you. Love you so much that I don't aim to let you go on like this. Your brother killed a man that had a wife and cute little kid. For that he's got to pay. You know it's only right. And he's wanted in Mexico for murder. Own up to it now, ain't I right?"

"I'll never let you take him," she vowed.

But the words almost stuck in her throat. Dismay was crushing her down, beating away her loyalty. Harry a cold-blooded murderer! And this deputy marshal was making it so hard for her to back the miscreant brother.

"Girl, you got to do the right thing," he pleaded rather than argued. "You did when you wouldn't take the bank's money. Now there's a still bigger problem put square on your shoulders. The way you handle it, that's the way you'll go the rest of your life. And—I want you to go it with me."

"Yes, you, the man-hunter!" she forced herself to bite out in withering contempt.

"Man-huntin' has to be done," he defended. "It's only that way that decent folks are protected from man-killers, savvy? For every law-breaker I land in jail I feel I've lifted a threat off a thousand homes."

He turned his back on her and started over the ridge. Gave her full opportunity to aim a gun on his back. She did it, too.

"Noel, stop!" she ordered. "I'll kill you before you get him."

He looked around. Swift disappointment swept over his face. Jessie flushed with shame. His gray eyes measured her for a moment, and Jessie quailed still more under their compelling power.

"I thought you might come to this," he told her. "But I'm trustin' my life to your hands, girl, because I want you to decide 'tween me and Harry. If you decide to go on with Harry, that leaves me afoot, without water," and he shook the empty canteen hanging across his shoulder.

"My horse," he went on, "broke away

from me when the dust storm got too bad last night. The buzzard'll be pickin' my bones before I can make it back to water any place."

"It's not far to Skull Spring," she reminded him.

"But your brother will leave that poisoned," he declared. "He poisoned a water hole three days ago, and three of the posse died after drinkin' it. No empty bottle was found, so he still has some poison."

"That—that's a lie!" Jessie cried. "He couldn't do a think like that."

"Then," he came down to the inevitable, "I reckon you're done set in your judgment—freedom for your brother and this for me."

He shrugged his shoulders and gestured toward the vast sweep of seared wasteland. Jessie suppressed a shudder. To her mind there flashed the picture of buzzards settling down on the lifeless body of Len Noel. The huge, ugly birds would eat his eyes first. Those honest, fearless eyes that had love for her in them now!

But Harry had put his life in her hands first. Unable to cope further with the terrible decision, Jessie darted down over the ridge.

"Run, Harry, run! Take the horse!" she cried ahead of her.

But Harry already was running. He had heard their voices and knew that there could be only some pursuer in conversation with the sister. He was three hundred yards away from the rocks, and fighting the horse toward Skull Spring. He had even taken all the water with him. A dull ache set up in Jessie's heart. Selfish Harry. Murderer; poisoner. She tried to remember only that he had stuck up for her in the face of Handsome John's brutal proposal.

Jessie took up the trek with the marshal, baffled, sick in soul, frantic in mind. What would she do in the awful showdown that was to come at Skull Spring? Take the part of this man with her now? He was going to fight. It was in his eyes, in every step he made. Or still stick by Harry in spite of all the weak brother's sins?

Harry's horse might not even hold out to Skull Spring. And she knew that Handsome John would not give him another mount until he had his price for help to Harry.

Again weary tramping. A tortuous mile. Then a second killing hour. Len's lips were swelling, his tongue growing thick. She had not been without water so long as he. But her legs hardly would stay under her. The terrible burn and glare of the sun sucked vitality from their bodies. They quit talking. Jessie pulled along doggedly, in momentary fear that one or the other of them would fall and not be able to get up.

THINGS changed abruptly. For over the hill came Harry and Handsome John on fresh horses. An exclamation of joy broke from Jessie's lips. Saved. Harry had not deserted her entirely, even when he was hardly able to ride. But they had come out to get her and her only.

"Come on, Sis," Harry called. "That deputy can try his luck hoofin' it to Skull Spring, and then back to Trumbull's."

"But it's forty some miles, Harry," Jessie vetoed. "He never can make it, even with plenty of water."

No amount of argument or compromise proposals would change Harry and Handsome John. They meant to abandon Len to his fate.

"Go on with 'em," Len urged. "I'll make it."

Jessie lifted a hand to his shoulder. Her eyes met his steady, troubled search.

"Don't be afraid," she whispered.

With that, she left him and went out to her brother and Handsome John. The stalwart forty-year-old bandit was still handsome, except for watery blue eyes. He stuck out his foot and reached his hand to Jessie.

"Climb up behind me, little cutie," he ordered.

It was the zero hour. Jessie knew now that she loved two of these men so hopelessly involved. Harry and Len. Harry was doomed, however she looked at his fate. But if he would only die like a man!

"Harry," she cried, "I want you to kill this big snake! If there's any manhood left in you, now's your time to show it."

Her eyes burned with the wild fire of a primitive soul. Her voice carried the ring of irresistible challenge.

"Otherwise," she hurled at the startled Harry, "you're sellin' your sister and helpin' to murder the finest man who ever set foot on this desert. Be a man, Harry. Come on, boy, you've got it in you!"

She might be sending Harry to his death. But it would be worth it, if he would only rise to a little nobility in the going.

Handsome John seemed to know that he could not match talk with a girl so fired with fighting zeal. Harry was weakening. It was in his eyes. Then it would be three against one. For the girl was going to fight. Better take the two men, before they got together. That deputy was coming on the run.

Handsome John brought his gun flashing onto Harry. Harry dived sidewise and dug hard for his gun. But his suffering had made him drag-handed. Handsome John hit him in the breast. Harry fell from his plunging horse. But he rose to one elbow and tried to fire. Jessie was running to him, her own gun swinging upward.

"Shoot me in the back!" Handsome John challenged Jessie derisively.

He whirled his back onto her and went charging for Len. He was going to end this thing here and now, so far as the two men were concerned. He could not have avoided a fight with Len anyhow, for Len already was within gun range.

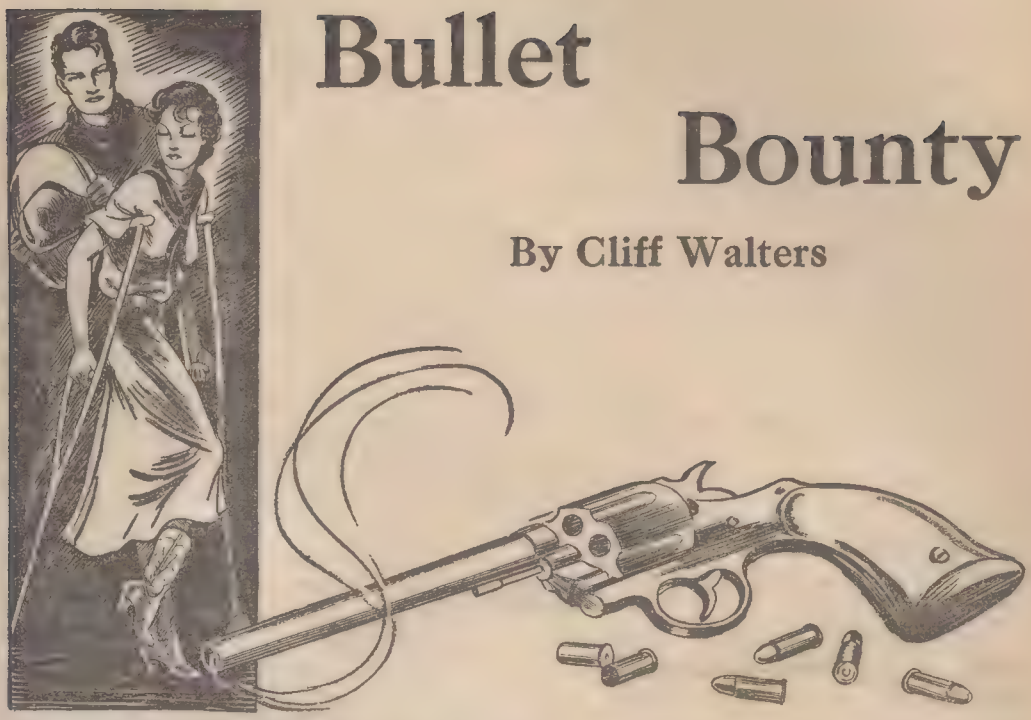
Handsome John had the advantage. He could fire past his horse's head and neck, which afforded him a fair shelter. And he was bearing down with terrifying speed on a man hardly able to stand on his feet.

Len stopped in his tracks. The guns roared out their death talk. Doom was there, for somebody, in every shot. Jessie's eyes closed in spite of all she could do. Then life seemed to stand still an eternity. The shooting was all over. But the horse was still running. That meant Handsome John had won. She didn't have the heart to open her eyes yet.

"It's all right, Jessie."

Thank God! Len's voice. The horse was running with an empty saddle. Len came over to her. His eyes betrayed suffering as he looked at the lifeless Harry.

"It's all right, Len," Jessie murmured softly, in his arms. "It took you to give Harry his chance to go out like a man. And to give me my chance to live—like you want me to."



Bullet Bounty

By Cliff Walters

Jane could forgive her cowboy sweetheart anything—except offering her pity.

JANE was tying her pony at the hitch-rack in front of the Roanville General Store when she sighted Trace Warfield, gloriously, recklessly drunk, swaying his spur-jingling way toward the Trail End Saloon. He wouldn't have noticed Jane if she hadn't called:

"Trace!"

He turned, his tall form weaving uncertainly on pointed boot heels. Then, with exaggerated gallantry, he doffed his big hat and laughed at her with those wide-set gray eyes of his.

"Hi, neighbor!" he greeted. "Where do you keep yourself lately? Never see you around."

Her lips curved into a peculiar little smile. "Have you tried very hard to see me?"

"Maybe I've been pretty busy lately." A shadow of sobriety crossed his wind-tanned face.

"Yes, I—I know," she agreed. "Last week you buried your father, Trace. I've been wanting to see you, talk to you."

"Well?"

"Not now," she said. "But I will say this much: Whisky isn't a very satisfactory grief medicine. You've just inherited the Crossbow outfit. It's a lot of responsibility, Trace. You're young yet to—"

"You're younger," he bruskly reminded her. "Makes me think of the time we used to ride to the old Sage Crick schoolhouse together. You kept after me to study harder. Now you're still tellin' me the same things!"

Her dark eyes were a little misty, her voice a little broken as she remarked, "I don't mean—I've never meant to be a meddler, Trace. But a man in your place can't drink himself out of trouble. It works the other way. Especially when he has so much to lose."

He laughed. "Sorry, Janie girl. I came to town to get drunk. That's what I've been doin', and what I'm goin' to finish up doin' right pronto. Besides,

I see your much admirin' friend, Carl Swan, standin' there achin' to butt in."

Trace Warfield continued his way to the saloon. Jane turned, saw middle-aged, gaunt Mr. Swan smiling at her.

"Seems like your lecture didn't take," he ventured.

"It seems that way," she admitted, the color creeping into her cheeks. "Oh, I wish Trace wouldn't make a fool of himself."

"Just so he don't make a fool of you," came the quick reply.

"What do you mean by that, Carl?"

"Well, standin' here in the street tryin' to argue with a drunk man. That won't help you any. Nor it won't help Trace Warfield. He's free, white, and owns one of the biggest spreads in this country. He can do as he dang pleases."

"You're right," she confessed, starting into the store.

"Wait!" Swan called. "There's a dance in town tonight. I was goin' to ride out to your place and get you. But now that you're here, it saved me that trip. We'll have some supper together and then go."

"Sorry," she replied. "I didn't dress for any dance."

"You look like a million in any kind of clothes!" he complimented. "Don't turn me down on that excuse."

"I—I don't feel like dancing tonight, Carl."

"Wouldn't you stay if rich Mr. Warfield was to ask you?"

She fought back the sharp retort rising to her lips. She realized that she was sensitive about Trace. But then, she had loved him ever since they had gone to the Sage Creek school together. Apparently Trace had never suspected this. Jane hoped that nobody else would. Therefore she masked her feelings beneath casual words as she said:

"Don't be silly, Carl. And now, I must go into the store."

"Probably 'cause you know I won't follow you in there. 'Cause you know that me and old Storekeeper Baldwin's on the outs over that bill he claims I owe him."

"Not that at all," she soothed. "We're out of coffee. And Mr. Baldwin has some for sale, I believe. Good night, Carl."

"Good night," he answered gruffly. "There'll be plenty other girls at the dance!" He turned abruptly and strode toward the livery stable across the street.

Jane was still in the store when, shattering the placidity of Roanville, there came the sound of shots. Jane thought of Trace Warfield, and started toward the door. But Storekeeper Baldwin called, "Keep back!" and shoved past her to peer cautiously out the door.

"Trace Warfield's on his horse. He's drunk. And startin' to celebrate with his sixgun. Get back from the front of the store, Jane!"

Baldwin caught her arm and piloted her along the side of the counter. Jane's pulse quickened as she heard those echoing shots out there in the street, the clattering hoofs of Trace's horse. There were yells as men ducked for cover, and the wild voice of Trace himself given to rollicking, lusty war-whoops.

"Dang fool!" old Baldwin growled. "I never seen him go this hog-wild before. If he keeps this up, he'll soon go through with—"

His words were drowned in another echoing shot. A leaden slug pecked through the big front window. Jane cried out and suddenly sagged against the counter.

"Girl! You're hit!" Baldwin ranted. "Here! Let me help you!" He caught her up into his arms, rushed around a stack of nail kegs and made for the back room.

"You've been shot through the knee!" he yelled. "Lay here till I can get Old Doc Whitty!"

A nauseating sensation assailed Jane. Pain reflected itself in her dark eyes. The world seemed to be whirling crazily about her. The noise of shots and hoofbeats rose to hideous crescendo. Yet she clamped her lips tightly and waited until Doc Whitty, who lived at

the end of the street, could get there.

"Get out!" commanded the gruff old doctor to the men who had curiously followed him.

"Sure!" agreed Sheriff Naldo. "I've got some ridin' to do anyhow! Come on with me, a couple of you fellers!" Three men stomped out.

Although Doc Whitty was a gruff old person, his hands were gentle and extremely skillful. Too, he liked Jane. The Warm Springs place, owned by the girl and her uncle, "Jackpot" Farrington, was one of the few places that the elderly physician ever visited for any other than strictly professional reasons.

"Is it bad, Doc?" Jane groaned.

"I know it must feel bad enough," he evaded. "But you're a game kid." Then, in a different tone, he growled, "The drunken fool! Scattering lead like it was harmless confetti!"

N HOUR later they carried Jane down to the old doctor's place which, in times of emergency, often served as hospital. The girl was dozing fitfully when, at dawn, Sheriff Naldo came riding into town with a prisoner. She heard Old Doc Whitty go outdoors. Voices drifted through a window of Jane's room.

"Well," the doctor was grunting. "You must feel pretty proud of yourself, Warfield. Maiming an innocent girl!"

Jane propped herself up, peered through the window at Trace's face, haggard and gray in the dawn light. She heard him answer:

"It's all right, Doc. Anything you say, I deserve. Nothin' could make me feel any worse."

"Better lock him up, Sheriff," Doc Whitty replied. "Fools like him are dangerous running loose."

"That's just what I aim to do!" Naldo snapped. "And he'll stay behind jail bars plenty long enough. Folks are plenty riled. Say, there comes Jim Bates and Carl Swan and—"

"Take Warfield inside!" Doc Whitty rumbled. "That bunch of gents are bent on handing Warfield his dues!"

"Trace!" Jane called. "Come here!"

A moment later he was standing there gazing down at her. But the reckless look was gone from his gray eyes. They were shadow-haunted, dulled with contrition and despair.

"Don't worry about those men out there," she told him.

"Do you think I care about them?" he countered. "Do you think anything they could do to me would hurt as much as—as standin' here just lookin' at you? And knowin' what I do?"

Angry voices rose outside. There was Sheriff Naldo's voice rising in protest, and Old Doc Whitty's growling tones. And yet Carl Swan managed to reach the door of Jane's room.

"Come on out and take your medicine, Warfield!" rasped the intruder.

"Wait!" Jane's voice rose to a cry. "Who was it that got a bullet in the knee!"

"You!" Swan grumbled, the rifle crooked in his arm, menacing Trace. "But outa decency's sake, us citizens—"

"You citizens mind your own business!" Jane stormed. "It was all an accident. And don't think Trace Warfield's going to jail for it, either!"

"What's that?" piped up Sheriff Naldo who had wedged himself in the doorway alongside Swan.

"I mean," said Jane, with slow precision, "that I refuse to prosecute anyone for what's happened to me."

"Huh!" Naldo snorted. "That's a fine note! After me takin' a wild goose chase after him."

"I didn't send you after him, did I?" Jane parried.

"No-o," he admitted, "but I took it for granted that—"

"Don't take anything for granted!" she admonished.

"Just a minute, Jane," Trace put in quietly. "I'm not askin' you to save my bacon. I deserve, and I'm willin' to take any punishment I've got comin'. All I regret is that it can't help you."

"If you want to help me," she said coldly, "go on home! Keep away from me, Trace Warfield. And when you're doing your future drinking, which you seem to have your heart set on, let the guns alone. Don't—don't cripple anyone else!" Her voice broke. Tears coursed unchecked down her pallid cheeks.

There was a moment's pause. Trace turned to the sheriff and said, "Well?"

"Go on!" Naldo blustered. "It's up to her, unfortunately!"

Trace moved to the doorway. He hesitated, looked back at the girl lying there. His own eyes misted then. But he clamped hard that lean jaw of his and strode out through the group of muttering men, mounted his horse and headed homeward.

The crowd dispersed, their voices faded into distance. Old Doc Whitty came into Jane's room. He asked:

"How's the knee?"

"Not too bad, Doc."

"And the—heart?"

"Heart?" she echoed curiously.

He nodded his gray head. "Strange that you have to suffer a thing like this, and because of the man you love."

"Listen, Doc. Don't jump at conclusions. I wouldn't have prosecuted anyone for doing what Trace Warfield did."

"Maybe not," he agreed. "And still, I've always been pretty successful at reading symptoms. Well, there comes your Uncle Jackpot loping into town."

"Wondering what's happened to me!" Jane said. "Call to him, Doc."

Soon Jackpot Farrington, a wizened, bald-headed little man was clumping into Jane's room. He listened to her story, and then very promptly threatened to kill Trace Warfield. But within ten minutes Jane had wrung from him a promise that he wouldn't harm the owner of the Crossbow outfit.

"You know I couldn't deny you anything!" Jackpot said resignedly. "I won't take a shot at Trace Warfield—which he's got comin' to him. But I'll blister him with words!"

"That won't help any."

"It'll keep me from bustin' wide open."

Jane didn't feel equal to arguing any further. She turned to Doc Whitty and asked, "When can I go home?"

"Oh, in about two or three days, maybe."

"I won't be permanently crippled?"

"That bullet could have done a lot more harm," the old doctor soothed. "I hope to have you up and around soon. But you won't be able to do much work. Which means that you, Jackpot, had better stick close to Warm Springs. No slipping over the mountain to Wingtown for a month or two of card-playing."

Jackpot, who had derived his nickname from his love of cards, grinned sheepishly and said, "I like my poker sessions every so often. But you needn't think I'd leave Jane 'fore she's able to take care of herself. She's the one thing I love better than cards."

"Thanks for saying that, pard." Jane smiled at her uncle.

"You know I mean it!" Jackpot snorted. "Otherwise, I'd never promised to keep from shootin' Trace Warfield."

ONE WEEK later Jane was sitting on the porch of the Warm Springs ranch house which nestled in that green, fertile little valley where the small herd of Farrington cattle grazed. Grass was over-plentiful here. The valley, and adjacent range above would have supported far more stock. But the Farrington finances wouldn't permit. Once Jane had thought of asking Trace Warfield to "lease" her a hundred head of cows and calves.

She thought of it again, but shook her brown head. She had told Trace to keep away from her. He was doing a good job of it. Sometimes she found herself wishing he would come riding

up. But she put this wish from her mind—or tried to.

Yet, even now, her gaze was on the ridge beyond which lay the far-flung Crossbow outfit, a dreamy, lazy gaze. Suddenly the girl's dark eyes opened wide. A rider had appeared on the crest of the ridge, a tall straight rider who, hesitating there for a moment, turned his horse and disappeared from sight.

"I told him to keep away!" Jane mused. Yet she bit her lip rather ruefully.

Pretty soon she said, "I hate him! How can I help but hate him?"

But the sunlit riffles of the creek below seemed to chortle: "You love him. You love him!"

"I don't!" she denied vehemently.

"Don't what?" asked Old Jackpot, who was walking from the corral toward the house.

"Just talking to myself." Jane flushed a little.

"How's the knee today?"

"Better," she answered. "I can't bend it yet. But I know it's going to be all right. It's got to."

"It better." Jackpot's mild eyes hardened as he looked at the ridge which separated him from Crossbow range. "But every time I think of it, well, it sure takes power to keep my promise."

"Doc Whitty forgot to bring our mail out from town again today," Jane changed the subject.

"Guess I'll ride in and get it tonight," Jackpot said. "That is, if you feel well enough to be left alone for a few hours."

"Of course I do," she said.

So it was that Jane, alone that night, watched the new moon grow bright in the sky arched above Warm Springs Valley. The night breeze brought faint perfume of wild roses from the creek banks. Breathing the delicious fragrance, Jane decided to go down there and pick some of those pink blossoms. She took up her crutches.

That left knee was painfully rigid. Yet she didn't stop until she reached the nearest rose bush.

"Jane," said a low voice.

Startled, she might have fallen if Trace Warfield hadn't moved forward quickly and steadied her.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to—"

"You should be sorry that you're where you aren't wanted!"

"I was afraid of that," he answered dismally. "But I couldn't help it, Janie. I had to see you, had to talk to you. I tried this afternoon, I tried several times before, but your uncle's always stickin' pretty close to home, it seems."

"Have you talked to him?" she asked.

"Well, he's talked to me. Plenty! He hates me, Janie. Not that I blame him. But when I think of how much more you must hate me, I nearly go crazy!"

"Why should you care so much about what I think?"

"How can I help it?" he said. "How do you s'pose I felt just now, watchin' you tryin' to walk with those crutches?"

"I don't want your pity!" Those dark eyes of hers were pools of scorn.

"But there must be something I can do!" he persisted. "This private range of yours is understocked. I've got cattle, lots of 'em. And money—"

"Keep them!"

"I'll send for the best doctor money can hire, if you'll only let me."

"Doc Whitty's doing all that can be done," she replied.

He shrugged wearily, and said, "There's something else I must tell you, Jane. I've loved you ever since we went to school together, and didn't know it till the other mornin' when I saw you at Doc Whitty's."

She tossed her head. "I told you I didn't want pity! And that's what it is. You don't love any girl, Trace Warfield. But I won't take your money, or cattle, so you're offering me yourself."

"That ain't true, Jane Farrington!" he answered in a low, hurt tone. "That's why I can't keep away from

you. And I won't, from now on. I'll sneak down here every time Jackpot's away, if that's the only way I can keep from havin' trouble with him."

"Haven't I anything to say about it?" she questioned. "I think you'd better be leaving."

"All right. But I'll be back. Remember, Janie girl, I love you!"

He moved away, was lost among the rose bushes that fringed the creek. Tempted to call him back, Jane pressed a tight little fist to her mouth.

"Love!" she scoffed. "He isn't fooling me. He's trying to be gallant. He feels sorry for the poor girl his bullet crippled. Pity!" Tears, silver beads in the moonlight, glistened on her lashes. But she kept her chin up as, gripping her crutches, she hobbled back up the slope toward the house.

Far back on the ridge a coyote mourned to the starlit heavens, a sound that mingled with the faint clop of hoofbeats dying away into the night.

EIGHT days later, when Jackpot was away, Trace Warfield visited Jane again. Then another afternoon he called. But always the girl flung at him that one bitter word, "Pity!" Yet, when she was alone, queer thoughts crept in. She knew that the force of a whizzing bullet had never shattered her love for Trace Warfield. Sometimes she tried to make herself think so, but she couldn't. He was the one man she had ever loved. This being the case, she sometimes reasoned, why not accept his offer of marriage, even if he was trying only to do the gallant thing by her? That awful temptation to take what she wanted most in life while it was being offered her!

One day Carl Swan drifted by on his way to look at a bunch of cattle he was buying. Those pale blue eyes of his focused peculiarly on Jane as, supported by her crutches, she came out the door.

"Hello, Carl!" she greeted.

"Howdy," he said.

"Won't you come in?"

"Nope." He shook his head. "Just dropped by to see Jackpot about a couple of pack saddles he had for sale. But he's up in the pasture, I guess."

Jane smiled a little wistfully. "It used to be that I didn't have to urge you to visit me."

"Yeah," he agreed. And with brutal frankness, added, "Looks like you're crippled permanent, Jane. I've knowed two different fellers that got a bullet in the knee, and both of 'em walked stiff legged ever since!"

She winced. "I see. And you're not interested in crippled girls!"

"Now hold on, girl. I didn't mean to—"

"I know what you're thinking, Carl." Bitterness crept into her voice. "You'll find Uncle Jack up in the pasture."

"Well, uh, all right," grunted the tactless visitor. "Maybe I'll see you again some day. So long."

Jane dabbed at her eyes. Swan, the cattle buyer, had bluntly proved what the girl already knew: Young men were no longer interested in her, unless they were gallant liars like Trace Warfield, trying to correct wrongs for which they were responsible!

That night, with a fifteen dollar check which Swan had tendered him in payment of the pack saddles, Jackpot rode into Roanville. He offered to take Jane in the buckboard, but she declined. Perhaps she was hoping, deep in her heart, that Trace would put in an appearance. But in this she was disappointed.

The hours dragged by as she sat there alone on the porch. But no rider came splashing across the creek. This fact gave Jane a little twinge of alarm. Suppose she had at last discouraged Trace by that word, "Pity!" she was always throwing at him? Then what? What would the future, a future without this man she loved, really mean? Jane trembled a little. She forgot, in this instant of terror, that her injured knee was improving steadily. There

were no consoling thoughts, only that keen, terrible dread of losing Trace forever.

"I won't lose him!" she told herself. "I'll marry him." And she began to cry. "Let him marry me for any reason he wants. I'll be marrying him for love. Anyhow, I won't lose him!"

But she was still pondering over the problem when Jackpot came home. The latter had acquired a new hat.

"Well!" Jane called. "You must be getting dolled up for some special reason, Uncle Jack."

He grinned a little sheepishly. "Well, kinda,thought I'd ride up to the high range tomorrow."

Jane nodded. She knew he would ride to the high range—and beyond the mountains to the little settlement of Wingtown where he usually did his gambling. Yet there was no protest. Jane's injury was rapidly improving. She could walk without the aid of crutches! She had tried it this afternoon. In a few more days. . . .

"Uh, sure you can get along if I'm gone a few days?" Jackpot was asking.

"Sure!" She dropped her crutches and walked across the porch.

"Good for you!" he whooped. "Gosh, but I'm glad to see that old knee bendin'!"

"It's caused you enough trouble and extra work, Unc!"

"Don't fret about that." He caught her hands in his and patted them.

The next day, near noon, Carl Swan came loping up to the house where Jane was sitting. The cattle buyer appeared excited. He yelled:

"Where's that uncle of yourn?"

"Why?" she asked.

"Here's why!" He slid off his horse, pulling a slip of paper from his shirt pocket. "Take a look!"

Jane stared at the proffered check which was drawn to the order of Jack Farrington, her uncle. But it was the amount of the check which caused her to gasp:

"Fifteen hundred! There must be some mistake, Carl. The check you gave Jackpot was for fifteen dollars."

"Yeah!" he snorted. "Quite a mistake! And Jackpot made it when he raised this check to fifteen hundred! And cashed it in the Trail End saloon last night."

"He couldn't do a thing like that, Carl!" she denied.

"No?" he sneered. "Well, there it is, in black and white! No card fiend like he is can be trusted. Yeah! And he told Joe Gench, the barkeep, that he'd sold me his cattle when Joe seemed a little leary of cashin' such a big check without the boss's orders!"

Jane's tense hands gripped the arms of the chair in which she sat. True, Jackpot was a gambler. But an honest one. He didn't steal money.

"He couldn't have done it," she reiterated aloud. "Some passing stranger might pull such a trick. But Jackpot lives here. He knows he'd be found out."

"He *did* live here," Swan cut in. "I've got to ketch up with him. Prove this check was raised. Now, where is he?"

"He left early this morning, probably for Wingtown," Jane explained, a cold fear tugging at her heart. "He usually takes the Hawk Pass trail."

"Then I'd better be on my way!" Swan spurred his horse, a weary-legged, hard-ridden animal. "He ain't goin' to pull a trick on me, and then skip out. I'll find him if—"

"There he comes now!" Jane cried, as a rider came loping down the ridge to splash through the creek.

It was Jackpot, all right. But he wasn't wearing the new hat he had bought last night. His bald head was bound with a bandanna.

"What happened?" Jane cried.

"Plenty!" Jackpot rasped. "Somebody bounced a bullet off'n my head, and rode off leavin' me for dead. But I picked up his trail when I finally come to. It leads this way. Has Trace Warfield showed his handsome mug around here?"

"Trace Warfield?" Jane quavered. "Do you think it was—"

"Who else would it be?" Jackpot rumbled, his eyes flashing. "I know he's been sneakin' around here lately. I told him to keep away from you, Jane, or else a certain promise I'd made to you would be off. He told me nothin' could keep him away from you. So the dirty ambushin' skunk. . . . What are you doin' here, Swan?"

"A little business matter, Jackpot," Carl replied. "But that can wait. If Warfield's sneakin' around here, maybe waitin' to take another crack at you, we'd better find him. Thought I seen somethin' movin' down there in the brush by the creek. I'll just take a look."

He moved in that direction, with Jackpot starting to follow.

"Wait!" Jane called. "Let's see your head, Uncle Jack! And keep away from that creek. Oh, I wish you and Trace hadn't met! Nothing but trouble could— Look out!"

Jane, watching Carl Swan, had seen the latter turn down there by the creek. That big rifle of his suddenly whipped up to the shoulder for action. But it wasn't aimed at anyone concealed in the brush along the stream. It was pointed at Jackpot, who stood less than ten feet from Jane.

Yet, as the girl's sharp warning rang out, a six-shooter roared. Smoke puffed from behind a bush not twenty paces from the spot where Swan, rifle leveled at Jackpot, was crouching. A bullet clicked against Swan's upraised rifle, and whined off in dizzy flight.

Jane couldn't see the man with the six-shooter from where she clung to her chair. But she saw Swan whirl, and try to bring his rifle around to bear on the enemy. Again that sixgun spat. This time the cattle buyer's leg seemed to go out from under him. He sank to the ground. Then Jane heard that calm voice of Trace's saying:

"That's what you get for tryin' to kill Jackpot Farrington, Swan!"

"He was tryin' to kill me!" Jackpot yelled, a mystified expression on his leathery face as he stood there with drawn gun. "But don't you try it, Warfield!" He started to raise his weapon, but Jane reached out and caught the gun.

"Let go!" Jackpot ordered. "There's funny business goin' on here. I could swear it was Trace Warfield that bounced a bullet off'n my skull this mornin'. And, by hell, I'm goin' to—"

"Drop that gun!" Trace ordered. He had kicked Swan's rifle far out of its owner's reach. Now he moved forward from the creek bank, his unwavering sixgun pointed at Jackpot.

"Trace!" Jane's scream echoed across the valley. "You dare to pull that trigger and I'll—"

"Don't worry," came his even reply. "I'm just makin' sure that Jackpot don't kill me, just 'cause he's got a grudge against me. And because he's crazy enough to think it was me that shot him this morning, and then rode away leavin' him for dead!"

"Who else could it have been?" Jackpot shouted wildly. "I ain't got but one enemy. And that's the dirty, drunken skunk that shot my niece!"

Those gray eyes of Trace's were steady as his voice when he replied, "A man don't always know who's his enemy, Farrington. I just took this away from Mr. Swan there. A check that I just heard some talk about between Jane and Swan. Here. Take a look at it!"

Jackpot did look. His eyes blinked unbelievingly. Finally he gulped, "Fifteen hundred dollars! Why, that's the fifteen-dollar check that Swan give me. But I didn't raise it!"

"Sure?" Trace asked.

"Yes—sure!" Jackpot's face was purple with rage. "I cashed it in the Trail End saloon. Joe Gench, the barkeep, cashed it. If that dirty skunk raised it— Hey, ain't that Sheriff Naldo comin' there?"

"I hope so," Trace answered. "I've been expectin' him for quite a little time."

SHERIFF NALDO, Jackpot, Trace and the wounded Carl Swan were grouped around Jane's chair. And the truth was being aired.

"I was called into town last night by Baldwin, the storekeeper," Trace was telling. "I saw Swan and Gench, the bartender, pow-wowin' at the back end of the saloon. I know now what they were doin'. Swan was raisin' his own check."

"Raisin' my own check!" Swan snarled. "Who ever heard of sich doings?"

"I never did," Sheriff Naldo put in. "It might've been a purty profitable trick for you if Jackpot here had been killed by your bullet this mornin'. You and Gench would've had a fifteen-hundred-dollar claim against this outfit."

"Yeah," Trace drawled. "Which, I've heard, you want, Mr. Swan. Didn't you and Gench buy a bunch of pure-bred Hereford cattle last week? And ain't this about the only piece of range where pure-breds could run without mixin' with common range cattle?"

"Hmm!" Jane put in. "Maybe that's why Carl Swan was interested in me—before I was crippled."

"I thank you for savin' my life this mornin', Trace Warfield. But I don't know that I'll ever be able to forgive you for—that!" Jackpot pointed to Jane's injured leg.

A strange expression came to Trace's countenance. "Maybe I'm not beggin' forgiveness for that."

"What?" Jane cried. "Then all your talk has just been acting!"

"No-o," he drawled softly. "I'm still sayin', and in front of witnesses, that I want to marry you more than I want anything in the world."

So, thought Jane, he still pitied her.

"Maybe you two would like to be alone, Trace," Sheriff Naldo suggested.

They moved away. Jane's heart was beating wildly. She knew that the showdown was here.

"I love you, Trace," she said slowly. "But I can't overcome the idea that you're proposing to me because you're sorry for me. Well, you needn't be. I'm all right. Look!" She rose from her chair and walked.

"Gosh!" Trace blurted. "You're goin' to be as well as ever! You're darn near there now."

"Yes," she answered. "So you see there's no obligation. You don't owe me a thing, Trace. You can forget all about being gallant."

"Hey, Trace!" called Sheriff Naldo. "Haven't you spilled that news about the bullet yet? Swan's just had to admit it!"

"Now what?" Jane asked.

"Well, maybe you were right about the obligation business," Trace told her. "You see, when Storekeeper Baldwin was weighin' out some nails yesterday, he found a rifle bullet in the keg you were standin' by when you got shot."

"Rifle bullet?" she echoed.

"Yeah. Seems like Swan and Baldwin had had a little misunderstandin' about a store bill."

"They did!" she said. "Swan told me about it that night in town."

"Right. Well, when I got to shootin' around, makin' a fool of myself, Swan saw an opportunity to cover up a shot at old Baldwin—from the livery stable across the street. But he missed Baldwin and hit you."

"You *know* this, Trace? Has Swan admitted—"

"So Naldo says. Anyhow, he couldn't deny it. He's got the only .30-.40 in Roanville. Now you'll understand, maybe, why I plugged Swan in the knee when he forced me to drill him."

"Swan!" she exclaimed. "Then you don't owe me a thing, Trace. I owe you an apology. And a million thanks for saving my uncle's life."

Smiling, he said, "All you owe me is a kiss. And an answer to a certain question." His voice was suddenly husky. "Please make the answer 'yes,' Janie."

She did, even though it was hard to answer at all, so closely was she gathered into his eager embrace.

Buckaroo's Way

By Robert Dale Denver

SYNOPSIS

STARK (VAQ) WETHERILL, son of a murdered ex-sheriff.
NIDA GRESHAM, ranch owner.
TIM LAFLIN, her foreman.
GRIEF RODEBAUGH, her cook.
CAPT. JOHN GALLATIN, her uncle.
THE SCARRONS, a family of outlaws.
PATRICK JORY, a Scarron posing as a lawyer.

Scarron outlaws break out of prison, kill ex-Sheriff Dan Wetherill, and escape to Quivira Mt., where Stark pursues them.

for murder. Then they all go to Gallatin Canyon, which place is immediately beseiged by the Scarrons, who are after the treasure. There Capt. Gallatin reveals an Indian city discovered by him. In it are countless valuable objects. The Captain used the stolen treasure to finance his restoration work.

Because of Jory the Scarrons almost succeed in getting into the canyon, but Jory is found out in time and held prisoner. Meanwhile the Captain is fatally wounded and dies, naming Nida, Stark and Prof. Hannefeldt trustees of his discovery. It seems impossible to hold the outer

Nida Gresham meets the Squiers-Hannefeldt Expedition to explore Indian ruins, and also Patrick Jory, who tells her that years ago her uncle and the Scarrons looted a church in Mexico. Capt. Gallatin hid the treasure on Quivira Mt., where he lives surrounded by deaf-mutes. Jory, claiming to be a lawyer representing the church, has contacted Gallatin in an effort to recover the treasure. Gallatin has sent Jory to locate Nida.

Nida agrees to accompany Jory to her uncle, also arranging that her foreman lead the expedition into the same territory. On Quivira Nida helps Stark escape from being unjustly hanged

wall. All except Stark and a few men retreat up-canyon to the Indian city. On the way Nida is captured by Jory, who has escaped, and rescued by Stark.

The Gallatin party realize there is no hope for them unless they have help. Therefore Stark, Nida, Grief and Laflin run the rapids of Black Gorge, into which Gallatin Canyon runs, to get to the outside world for help. They make the dangerous passage safely, pursued by Scarrons all the way. They finally arrive at a ranch where they can secure horses to get to town. But before they can start out they are surprised by Jory, who they had thought drowned in the Black Gorge.

CHAPTER XXIII

Team Work

PATRICK JORY, whose real name was Scarron, was fond of the melodramatic; liked to drain his cup of triumph to the last drop. He wanted to prolong tasting the strong flavor of this victory. When his enemies were dead, they would be only unfeeling lumps of clay; while they were alive, the Indian in Jory wanted to make them suffer, to sweat in anticipation of death.

In which Jory did not plumb the true depths of his four helpless victims. They had dared danger so often in the last few days that it was to them almost like an acquaintance. Helpless, with their only guns on the table across the room, Laflin and Wetherill were not sweating; their minds were coolly planning. They had not given up and would not, no matter how great the odds against them.

Jory made the bad mistake of thinking they had quit because, had the situations been reversed, he would have.

His amber eyes examined them carefully, seeing that they had no weapons, and then he smiled.

"All of you, put up your hands," he ordered. "Except you, sweetness," he addressed Nida. "I couldn't be rough with you. After I get rid of these pals of yours, you and I'll ride back to the canyon and that gold Indian throne. You don't look very pretty now in those muddy duds, but don't let that worry you. We'll find you some of those old feather robes and weigh you down with gold bracelets and necklaces. It's been a long chase, folks, but we caught you. Our boat sprung a leak and we had to stop for a little repair work. Wrecked the boat above the creek, lost one man, but us three made it to shore and found your trail. And here we are." Jory grinned wolfishly.

"And as for you, buckaroo," he went on to Wetherill, "I'll be in no hurry about you. We're goin' to play a while with Dan Wetherill's son; burn a few pictures on you with a red-hot branding iron, and finish you off by inches. You've made us a lot of trouble."

"You said it," Jupe growled from the other room. "Come in here, Pat, and untie us. And watch that devil of a Wetherill."

Before Jory could answer, there came an interruption. One of his men, the long-haired young blond fellow, had disappeared from his window and came in now, prodding ahead of him with his six-shooter barrel, the Lightning Ranch cowboy.

"What's the idea?" the youth asked Wetherill indignantly. "I got in your horses for you. What's this feller holdin' me up for? What's goin' on here?"

Jory laughed. "What's goin' on here?" he mocked the puncher's bewildered voice. "Stick around a while and you'll see. Git over against that wall." He gave the cowboy a shove that slammed him up against the far side of the room. "The rest of you follow suit. Plaster yourselves 'longside that cowboy."

"Hey, Pat," Jupe called again, "come in here and untie us."

Wetherill, Nida and Laflin shifted their feet a little at Jory's order to move, but Grief lay on the cot, glaring balefully at the renegade.

"Get up outa there," snarled Jory, turning his gun on the little cook. "Climb on your hind legs or I'll sting your rump with a bullet."

"Damned if I do," returned Grief, letting out a groan as sharp pain stabbed his back. "I've got lumbagy. I can't git up."

Jory, with the disabled cook a ready-made butt for his savage humor, laughed and moved closer to the cot. "I'll fix that lumbagy of yours," he threatened. "Know a sure cure for it. A bullet through the belly." To see the little fellow squirming helplessly on his cot, clutching his stomach, groaning with the pain of an abdomen wound, would give Jory sheer pleasure, prolong the sensation of triumph.

He raised his gun. Jory was going to shoot the cook the next instant, Nida realized, and her blood boiled. She wasn't going to see gallant little Grief Rodebaugh, who had shared all their dangers and heart-breaking struggles, shot as he lay on his back.

The girl tensed, intending to spring at Jory in a mad attempt to knock aside the barrel of his gun. But before she could act, Grief himself got into action. Jory, thinking the cook helpless, had come closer to the cot than was prudent. Grief could not have lifted himself from the cot except by the same slow, painful process that a rheumatic old cow would get to her feet, but there was one belligerent act of which he was still capable: kicking. And he did it now, whaling out with both booted feet to strike Jory's knee caps a terrific crack. Jory fired, but with his whole body jolted by the kick, the bullet sailed into the wall over Grief's head.

And as if Grief's move had been a signal agreed on previously by the other three, they all got into action, working as a team, each taking a man as football players block out opponents.

Laflin was still near the stove on which, with true housewifely instinct,

Nida had set a kettle of water to heat for dishes. It was boiling furiously. Laflin, pivoting swiftly, gripped the handle of this kettle, snatching it up and flinging it with one motion straight at the oldish convict who stood with a carbine pointed in through the window. The kettle struck the lower sash, and as the lid flew off, boiling water splashed on the chest and neck of the man. He leaped back with a yelp of pain.

Grief's kick had shoved Jory back so that he was in a line between the young Scarron in the doorway and Wetherill. Stark at once launched himself forward, his hard body catapulting into Jory's middle, ramming him back against the long-haired young fellow. Recovering, Jory tried to train his gun on Wetherill, but Stark's left hand shot out to clutch Jory's wrist, forcing the barrel of the gun toward the ceiling.

As the long-haired young fellow staggered back from the impact of Jory's body, Laflin and Nida both flung themselves toward him. Laflin reached him first, to crack his fist squarely into the man's mouth, slamming him back against the wall where, getting his feet tangled, he went to the floor. As the man fell, Laflin, disregarding his injured arm, flung himself atop the other, striking and kicking.

This left free only the scalded man outside the window. Still bellowing with pain, he returned to shove in his carbine again.

Nida, with Laflin taking care of the blond, remembered the guns on the table and flashed across the room intending to snatch one up. Unfortunately, Jory and Wetherill in their desperate struggle barred her way. As the boots of the two scraped over the floor, Wetherill was flung against the table, upsetting it and sending the pair of six-shooters on it flying across the room. One went under the stove, out of easy reach, the other skittered across the floor toward Grief on his cot.

Foiled in seizing one of the six-shooters, Nida's eyes fell on the shotgun racked on the antlers and she sprang for it. The Scarron outside the window, at last having a chance to shoot at one of the swiftly moving figures without danger of hitting a friend, fired hastily.

The bullet sent at Nida as she reached for the scatter-gun missed by an inch. Bellowing out an oath, the man in the window rested the barrel of the rifle on the window-sill and took deliberate aim, determined this time to make sure of her.

Just in time Grief scooped up the gun that had slid across the floor within reach of his hand. Grunting painfully and without stopping to aim, he fired at the window, pulling the trigger again and again, the gun being a double-action affair that needed no cocking. Grief stopped firing only when the hammer snapped on an exploded shell. The man in the window straightened, dropped his rifle and clawed at the sill for support. For a second or two he hung there, then, with his face drawn in a hideous mask of pain, slipped down from sight.

Jory and Wetherill, in their mad struggle for possession of the six-shooter in Jory's hand, were moving too fast for Nida to be of help. She swung the shotgun on the yellow-haired fellow with whom Laflin was battling. The younger man was getting the better of the injured foreman, and managed finally to free his gun hand. In his excitement, instead of firing, the young fellow used the weapon as a club, dealing Laflin a blow alongside the temple. Then, breaking loose from the dazed Laflin, he got to his knees, intending to finish off the foreman with a shot. But as he turned, his eyes saw, not a foot away, the twin barrels of the shotgun held by the girl. To him the holes looked as big as cannons.

"Drop it!" she ordered curtly, and Yellow-Hair dropped the six-shooter, letting it fall into the woodbox.

Meanwhile, Jupe and Gid Scarron and the other man in the shed were trying to get into the mêlée. At the time

of Jory's entrance, when they had been eating, their ankles and one hand had been tied. Failing in a hasty attempt to untie the cords knotted about their ankles, the three decided to get into the kitchen by a series of jumps, in the manner of boys in a sack race.

Laflin, still stunned from the blow on his head, yelled a warning as Jupe hopped through the doorway with the other two men close behind him.

Nida swung the shotgun just in time to train it on Jupe's giant body. Scarron's lips lifted exposing his teeth. One more jump would almost bring him close enough to snatch the gun, but both hammers were back and Jupe knew if the girl shot, his body would be blasted to pieces. Snarling tigerishly, the three men hesitated, then edged a little apart, hoping to confuse the girl so one of them could safely rush in.

Again the young yellow-haired fellow on the floor got into action. While Nida's attention was held by Jupe and the other pair, he fished frantically in the woodbox for his gun. Laflin, fighting off his daze, lunged forward to knock the man aside.

The final outcome of the battle depended on the struggle between Jory and Wetherill, engaged in a titanic fight having for its arena the small space between the overthrown table and the doorway. With Stark's hand still locked on the wrist of Jory's gun hand, the pair strained, body to body, using their free hands to hammer one another with sledge-like blows that brought blood running down their faces.

Jory raised a knee to disable Wetherill, but Stark caught the blow on his hip, and slipped his free arm around Jory's neck, holding it in the crook of of his elbow as in a vise, exerting more and more pressure.

Jory gouged desperately with his thumb, just missed ruining the sight of Wetherill's right eye, half blinding him. Then, as the pressure on his throat increased, Jory again battered his fist into Wetherill's face, each blow snapping back Wetherill's head, but failing to loosen the strangling hold. Jory's face purpled and, suddenly feeling the big body go limp, Wetherill flung him against the stove. The man's head struck the apron in front of the fire box and Patrick Jory went down in a crumpled heap, blood flowing fast from a cut in his forehead.

Crossing, Wetherill took the six-shooter for which Laflin and the yellow-haired Scarron were struggling.

The young Lightning Ranch cowboy, who during all the struggle had stood plastered against the wall of the kitchen, now gave vent to a sudden chuckle.

"That's a good joke," he said to Nida. "Hell, Miss, the scatter-gun you're holdin' ain't loaded."

Jupe Scarron bellowed and rushed forward, but Nida dodged nimbly away. Wetherill planted a shot at Jupe's feet and ordered him back.

"Talk about brains," said Grief, in disgust, "that kid's sure got 'em. But we ort to give him credit at that for not mentionin' that unloaded shotgun before." Grief, who after a superhuman effort managed to get to his feet, now walked, bent over painfully, to the window to look outside. The body of the man he had shot lay there, as still as the shadow covering him.

"I thought I salivated him," the little cook remarked, satisfied. "If it hadn't been for this lumbagy, I'd 'a' finished all of 'em single-handed. Yessir, I'd of—" Grief suddenly doubled up again with an "Oh, ow!" and eased himself, with many grunts, to the cot.

Wetherill began tying the prisoners' hands behind their backs, ankles crossed, making the bonds tight enough so they would stay tied until men came out from Lovelace to take charge of them.

"Just a little delay," he said when he had finished. "And worth the time lost to see *Señor* Jory again. Cowboy, lead us to those fast horses of yours and show us the trail to Lovelace."

"And try to concentrate that high-

power brain of yours, kid," advised Laflin, "and put 'em on the trail *to* Lovelace—not away from it."

Ten minutes later, Nida and Stark jogged away from the corral on the wagon trail that the lad assured them led to no other place than the county seat. A huge moon was rolling up over the mountain range. After all the rainy nights, they had almost forgotten what a moon looked like. A mile from the ranch, after their horses were warmed up, the animals took the tireless lope of the wiry range pony.

The weariness of the riders had vanished. Tired bodies, it is said, in time of danger secrete chemicals that counteract the poisons of fatigue. The fight at the ranch house, with the final turning of defeat into victory, had freshened instead of tiring them.

"After all," said Nida, "there are folks that believe sleeping is only a bad habit."

"Yeah; I've worked for some of those folks," returned Wetherill.

The drumming of their horses' hoofs made a magic melody, and the cool air from the mesa swept their faces, charging their bodies with new vitality. Occasionally their hands reached out to meet.

Side by side, they dropped from the mesa to swing across the desert. A few lights in Lovelace looked near, but for many miles they gleamed mockingly without coming closer.

Their weary horses slowed down to cross a wide sandy arroyo, and then, as they topped a little hill, Lovelace suddenly lay before them. The hoofs thudded past the first houses. Wetherill pulled up.

"You're going to bed," he told Nida sternly. "And don't argue. But if you're a good girl, I'll promise to wake you up when the posse leaves. It'll take two or three hours to round up an army big enough to smash that crew. We'll bed you down at the sheriff's house."

Two minutes later they were pulling up in front of the rambling adobe building where the sheriff lived. Wetherill pounded on the door until Sheriff Pate, his fat girth clad in a night shirt that could have served for a tent, appeared. Holding a lamp, the sheriff stood blinking amazedly at his two visitors.

Even while he was explaining, Wetherill was carrying Nida into the house where Pate's wife took her in charge, promising hot water for a bath. Leaving her, Wetherill and the sheriff hurried out to arouse the town, gathering men, horses and guns. Every available horse in the town was put under saddle and topped by a fighting man. In addition, Stark arranged for a team, light wagon and a soft mattress to fit in the wagon bed.

When he returned for Nida, he found the girl sleeping, but dressed to ride in a huge pair of the sheriff's levis, his wool shirt and a pair of Mexican sandals.

"Wouldn't go to sleep," explained the sheriff's wife, "unless she was all set to travel."

Wetherill wrapped the blankets about the sleeping girl and carried her outdoors. She murmured drowsily, and her breath was soft against his neck as he deposited her on the mattress in the wagon.

Traveling over the cushioning sandy trail of the desert, Nida continued to sleep, but as the wagon bumped over a mountain road she sat up, all traces of weariness gone.

When the road ended, she swung into the saddle of a horse that had been led along for her and rode by Wetherill's side up Quivira Mountain.

CHAPTER XXIV

Throne of the Ancients

THE RIDERS of the posse were fresh if Wetherill was not, and he did not spare them, setting a relentless pace over the washboard of rough canyons, even loping down grades where some of them would ordinarily have

walked, leading their horses. Behind him the men swore at his impatience. They didn't mind going to fight the Scarrons, but they did mind breaking their necks keeping up with a hell-rider and a reckless girl who rode close behind him. Some even accused her of urging Wetherill to go still faster and faster.

Climbing finally past the Tanner cabin, the long line of horsemen struck for the north shoulder of the mountain and Gallatin Canyon. Coming into the trail over which Gallatin's deaf-mutes had brought pack-horse trains of supplies, Wetherill increased the pace. Dawn found them stopping to breathe their horses after a hard climb to the top of the ridge above Gallatin.

Somewhere off on the mountain thunder sounded faintly although the sky was clear. Nida and Stark knew the answer. Besieged and besiegers were still trading shots.

Recklessly Stark spurred down the trail, with Nida's horse following surefootedly, and the posse stringing out behind. Fat Sheriff Pate bobbed along at the rear. He was more than willing to let Wetherill lead the way over these mountain trails.

Plummeting down from the last shelf, the cavalcade clattered into the canyon itself, and on comparatively level ground pushed on at a lope. By the time they reached the wall and the empty houses of "Fort Gallatin," the guns up-canyon had stopped, whether for breakfast or because the Scarrons, under the leadership of the third brother, Rufe, had won, they had no way of knowing.

They had met no guard along the trail, which meant that Rufe Scarron had drawn in all the men for a final desperate effort to capture the red city and its fabulous treasure. Racing over the last mile, they could hear the guns starting above, and knew that Newsom and the deaf-mutes were still holding out. Wetherill stood in the stirrups and, signaling the rest to follow, spurred his horse to a gallop. Their hoofbeats made a rumbling within the canyon walls, but the guns going full blast were covering the noise of their approach.

In a bushy little park, Wetherill dismounted the men, Sheriff Pate not having arrived to take command, and led them into the brush. Nida kept by his side and he did not try to send her back. She had earned the right to be in at the finish. Dividing the posse into groups of five, each under a leader, he directed them so there was a semi-circle of guns completely hemming in the renegades. As the line moved forward, the Scarrons and their Quivira Mountain allies would be shoved in against the dike.

Coming nearer, Wetherill could see the besiegers had thrown up a high mound of dirt and rock directly under the dike, and men had pushed part way up the steep path. The defending guns were making very little reply, indicating a serious shortage of cartridges.

A little lull in the firing came and Wetherill emptied a rifle at the besiegers. Stunned by shots coming from their back, the Scarron guns ceased altogether.

"You polecats," bellowed Wetherill, "you're done for. I've got a hundred men here," he exaggerated in the interests of a bloodless surrender. "March out, and leave your guns behind."

Defiant yells answered this offer; the Scarrons thought he was bluffing, were unable to believe he had had time to reach Lovelace and bring back a posse. Stark passed the word along the line for the men to advance, and they crawled forward, firing fast.

The rolling thunder of many guns told the renegades that Wetherill had not been exaggerating very much in claiming a hundred men. But the Scarrons were in no quitting mood, and fought back desperately, firing hotly from behind the walls of the adobe buildings and horse corral.

Holy Joe Peters, who, as Wetherill guessed, would with his band be the first to quit, could be heard during a

lull in the firing, protesting against further resistance. Nida and Wetherill grinned. Holy Joe Peters and the other Quivira ranchers were in a jam; the Scarrons wouldn't allow their allies to quit.

Twice the Scarrons tried desperately to break through the advancing line, only to be set back with the loss of men. Little by little, as the posse moved closer, pouring in a steady fire, the Scarrons were driven into a more compact group.

How long the battle might have continued was questionable, but without warning there came a tremendous boom that all but deafened all ears in the neighborhood. Wetherill chuckled.

"What was left of that box of dynamite I hid back in the brush," he told Nida. "Some bullet must have hit it."

The explosion, harmless enough, decided the wavering Quivira ranchers in favor of surrender. Holy Joe Peters, waving a sombrero that had a bullet hole in its crown, came out in the open, yelling that he quit. In a body, the Quivira ranchers followed, holding up their hands.

"You'll have a lot of time to do your Bible-reading in a cell," Wetherill told Holy Joe. "But I'll do my best to get you a light sentence if you'll help me get back my black horse."

"Willingly, brother," responded Holy Joe. "That black was a good looker and I kinda thought if the owner didn't show up, I'd look after him. You'll find him over in the pasture at my ranch. Whatever sentence I get," went on Holy Joe in his old sanctimonious manner, "I've got it a-comin' to me. I have been a sinner in the Lord's sight, forgettin' that gold is the devil's lure. As the Good Book says, 'Lay not up treasure for moth and rust to corrupt.'"

After a torrid argument, Rufe Scarron and the others yielded and straggled down sullenly to give themselves up. Further resistance was hopeless; better even the certainty of dangling from a noose than taking chances on suffering agony from bullet-smashed bones or punctured lungs.

Leaving Sheriff Pate to establish a guard over the prisoners, Wetherill and Nida hurried toward the dike. Above the parapet they saw the heads of Jim Newsom, the remaining packers and the Mexican deaf-mutes. The men, exhausted by sleepless days and nights, waved their hands and shouted hoarsely. Together Wetherill and Nida climbed the steep trail, to be surrounded by a jubilant crowd. Dr. Hannefeldt and Mrs. Squiers, with the families of the Mexicans, came down to join in the celebration.

"You made quick time," said Jim Newsom, his face drawn from the long ordeal. "Have any trouble in Black Rock Gorge?"

"Nothing worth telling about," returned Wetherill. "Just one long pleasant journey, except Grief finally got down with his 'lumbagy.' Have any trouble here?"

"Scarcely any," cheerfully lied Newsom. "Just one long peaceful snooze since you left."

While the Mexican women cooked an enormous breakfast, Nida and Wetherill explored the streets where the sandaled feet of the ancient builders of the red city had trod centuries before. As they wandered along, the pair marveled at the architecture of the houses and larger buildings. Evidently the Zoltecs had had a fanatical veneration for snakes, for about all the façades of the large structures had been carved great, thick-bodied serpents.

They entered a great building on the plaza which Hannefeldt had pointed out from below as the rulers' royal palace. Many large rooms surrounded a lofty hall the roof of which was supported by long rows of tall red columns.

Slabs of vari-colored stone served as floor. About the walls sat enormous warlike figures, sculptured from the red stone of the canyon, with shields and swords of gold and silver, and sandals with gold soles and straps of silver on their stone feet.

They moved to the far end of the hall, where on a dais reached by a series of broad jasper steps, sat an elaborate marble and gold chair, as large as a couch. Its arms and high, fan-shaped back where made of hammered gold.

Stark picked Nida up easily and deposited her on the great marble and gold chair where once had sat a line of copper-colored, black-haired rulers. She looked small there on the mighty seat, and her pretty head crowned with ash-gold was tiny against the high, fan-shaped back.

Wetherill bent on one knee. "Your royal highness," he said, "wilt consider becoming the queen of a poor buckaroo?"

"Wilt be a terrible comedown for me," said Nida haughtily. "What have you to offer, lowly buckaroo?"

"That's the catch," sadly returned Stark. "All I've got to offer is a sorta mean disposition when riled, and a plumb willingness to start climbing after the moon for you, if you'd take a notion to want it."

"What would I want with the moon?" asked Nida scornfully. "But, still, I think I'll take a chance on your mean disposition. You have such a grand way of offering impossible things, Sir Buckaroo."

She arose and laid her hands on his shoulders. At what each saw in the other's face, the two suddenly became grave. For what lay in Nida's blue eyes and Wetherill's gray ones was more wonderful and strange than the treasures of an ancient city. The love of a man for a maid, of a maid for a man.

"You know, my dear," said Nida in a low voice, "that if I were really a queen, nothing you could bring me would matter, except your love."

"And you know you have that, and always will," Stark told her huskily.

She came into his arms, and the city of the Zoltecs faded and was forgotten.

(*The End*)

"It's all right, Ike, the Shirley Temple picture doesn't begin till seven-fifteen."

RANCH ROMANCES' amateur page

Editor's Note:—This page is made up from contributions of readers. On it we shall publish short pieces of prose or verse or cartoons. The only requirements are that the persons submitting material be amateurs, and that the contributions be such as will appeal to people interested in the West and in Western stories. For each contribution published we will send the writer (or artist, if it is a cartoon) two dollars. Each person may submit more than one contribution.

Address all contributions to RANCH ROMANCES' Amateur Page, 515 Madison Avenue, New York City. All submissions will be considered. No submissions will be returned. Remember—and this is important—all material must be original with the person submitting it, and not copied from anything else.

Lay Down, Dogie

Moon shining down on the old cattle trail,
Out of the hills comes a coyote's far wail,
Cowboys singing to herds trampling round:
Lay down, dogie, lay down.

Out on the air ring chords of guitar,
Sweet music peels o'er plains afar.
Coyotes cease wailing, all's quiet around,
The cattle calmly lie down.

The moon ceases shining down on the trail,
The coyotes are silent, no more do they wail,
Yet the cowboys keep singing to herds on the ground:
Lay down, dogie, lay down.

Miss Margaret Eakle, Rohrersville, Md.

Western Prophet

The old punchers down in Texas tell a story of an old rip-snorting terror of a Westerner who raged his way throughout Texas, gambling, shooting, riding. The Law was forever on Diamond Lou's tail, but for years he managed to shoot his way out of trouble.

Wherever he went he always boasted, "I live by the sixgun and by the holy cow, I'll die by the sixgun."

One day the Law, in the form of a stern old Texan sheriff, got the draw on him, and remembering Diamond's boast, said, "Feller, you've lived by the sixgun, but you're goin' to die by swingin' from the dangedest tallest tree in these here parts."

The sheriff thoroughly disarmed Diamond and roped him, and the yelling, merry posse chaperoned Diamond to the Hanging Tree.

Diamond kept shouting, "You fellers cain't hang me. I swear I'll die by the gun like a Texan." And he struggled violently but vainly against his ropes.

The sheriff strung him up, and just before the noose tightened, a shot rang out. A dark round hole jumped between Diamond's eyes, and he sagged against the useless rope. Diamond was dead, dead by his own prophecy.

The sheriff yelled, "What maverick did that? I'll string him up!"

It was the sheriff's own son, who full of booze in celebration of the hanging, had slouched against a near-by tree, twirling his gun and singing. The gun had accidentally gone off, the bullet marking its fateful way straight to Diamond's head. The strange prophecy had come true.

Johnnie Jones, Allison, Tex.

I Wish I Were a Cowboy

I wish I were a cowboy
With the bare earth for a bed;
With a saddle for a pillow,
And the blue sky overhead.

I wish I were a cowboy,
Where the cattle all roam free.
Out in the open spaces
Is where I long to be.

So after I grow older,
Say twenty-two or three,
I'll leave this dear old home of mine,
A cowboy for to be.

Miss Pauline Thaut, Edgar, Mont.

Obsequies on

By Frank Collinson

Life and death were both violent in the Texas of the '70's. Men took long chances, and did not always win, as Frank Collinson will tell you.

IN THE winter of 1875 there was a party of buffalo hunters camped on a small creek called Red Mud which heads in Dickens County, Texas and runs south into the Salt Fork of the Brazos. The bunch of which I was a member was camped on Duck Creek about fifteen miles north of them. They had for cook and hide pegger, a Frenchman. One evening when the whole outfit was in camp, the Frenchman said, "If you'll lend me a gun I'll go and try to kill a buffalo." He got a gun, a few cartridges, and pulled out. Later they heard a shot, noted the direction. Someone remarked, "Frenchie got a shot," and they paid no more attention.

It commenced to get late—near supper time. Others got busy and cooked and still Frenchie did not come in. When it got dark they shot a few times, thinking he was lost. Bedtime came and no Frenchman showed up. Two or three started out, going in the direction from which they had heard the shot; found nothing and went back to camp.

Daylight came and again no cook. The men looked again and all pulled out to see if they could find him. About 10 A.M. they found him, about two miles from camp—dead! He had been stamped and hooked so badly he hardly looked like a man. About fifty yards from where he lay was a dead buffalo bull. On examining the bull, they saw his tongue was cut and hanging loose from the jaw-bones. The men figured, and I guess correctly, that Frenchie had shot the bull; thinking it was dead, he had gone up and commenced to cut the tongue out; had had it almost out when the bull had come to life.

Evidently the bullet had hit the bull in a vital spot, but he had had the strength to get up and fight; had hooked the man and trampled him until he died from loss of blood from the wound

the Prairie

Frenchie had made in his neck to cut into his tongue roots.

The hunters took Frenchie to camp. Then one of them came over to our camp and wanted some outsiders to see how he had been killed. I went over with another of our party and saw Frenchie. They rolled him up in his bed and we buried him.

He was terribly mashed up; bones broken, flesh ripped open. A few rags were still on him, but he was all blood and dirt. That was the only man I ever saw killed by a buffalo.

The next winter we had a very severe blizzard which lasted nearly three days. Buffalo drifted and passed us by the thousands. After it cleared up a man rode into our camp, whose name was John Beal. He was freighting supplies to a small trading camp on Salt Fork and hauling hides back. He had sixty yoke of work oxen, and all negro drivers. He had been nearly twenty days coming from Griffin.

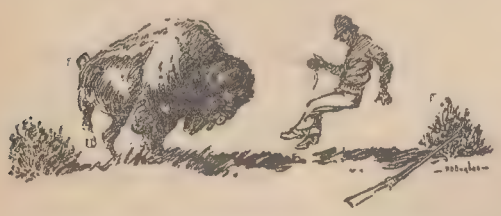
Before leaving Griffin he had hired a negro who had lately been discharged out of the 10th Cavalry. The blizzard struck about mid-afternoon. Beal had to get his outfit onto Little Duck Creek for wood and shelter. When they got there, about dark, this new man was missing. No one knew when this man had last been seen. It was no use to try and go out in that blizzard. They knew that if he did not find a camp that he was dead by then. So they hobbled most of the oxen and managed to get a fire started.

The blizzard was still raging the next day, but Beal started out and tried to take their back trail. One of the negro drivers went with him, but they could not get far. The next day was clear. When they got back on the old McKenzie trail the wind had swept it fairly clear. They followed their back trail about two miles and found the man dead a few yards south of the trail. The negro bullwacker would not go near the dead man, so the two went back to camp. Not one of those bullwackers would go near the corpse; they were all scared and superstitious.

About this time Beal heard some shots and started out to see who was camping near-by. He found our camp and wanted some of us to go see the man and help

him bury him. No one was inclined to go, but I finally asked, "How far is it?"

He said, "Four or five miles," so I went, taking a spade along. The snow was deep, but we got to him about noon. He was lying on his face; looked as if he had just lain down with his head on his outstretched arms and had never moved. He was frozen stiff as a log. I took him by the feet to see how stiff he was, and it was just like raising a log. We then tried to dig a hole; the ground was



frozen like a rock. We managed to dig a hole not over a foot deep, rolled the negro over into it and did our best to cover him up. We made a poor job of it, but finally did get him out of sight. Then we threw some brush on top of that and left him. When Beal went back a week later the ground was thawed and he put more soil on the grave. Later when the weather got warm, the coyotes scratched him out; some hunters saw the bones and reburied them.

I had barely got back to camp when another man came in—Doc O'Neel. He wanted someone to go and help him and his brother bury their partner who had been crushed to death in a rough gyp rock break on Croten Creek. I was undertaker again, but we did not leave camp until the next morning. It was at least twenty miles—snow piled up—a mean country to ride over. We got there late that evening. O'Neel's brother Tom was in camp watching over the dead man, whose name was Mike McCoy. They were just down from Kansas and were trying to follow the Wrath Trail, which had been made the year before when Lee Reynolds and Wrath had come with a big trading outfit from Fort Dodge and located on Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos.

The O'Neel brothers were caught in this same blizzard; had got off the trail and into some rough gyp hills and could go no farther. So they had camped by the side of a deep arroyo and looked for a place to get out of the storm. They found a kind of cave with an overhanging rock top. They got in and made a fire with some wood found in the arroyo and were very comfortable. Next day they got more wood and had a good fire.

Late that evening the storm quit. Tom O'Neel said he'd go and look for the horses and see where they were. The men had hobbled them when they'd camped. Doc said he'd go see if he could get some fresh meat—buffalo were all around. McCoy had said he was fine and comfortable there and would sleep a while.

Tom was the first to get back. When he went to the cave he found the whole top had caved in. A rock that weighed at least a thousand pounds was on top of McCoy. Tom told me he didn't know yet how he'd got the rock rolled off him. Doc got back about that time. McCoy was dead. When I got there he was just as when they'd found him, on his side with his hands between his knees. This rock had fallen about ten feet, hit him fairly on the shoulders and mashed him nearly flat. His breast was doubled in.

We did not camp in there. We carried the dead man out, straightened him out and wrapped him in about the finest painted buffalo robe I ever saw. It was in his bed and was Comanche painted. The next morning we did the best we could to dig a grave, but the ground was all gyp rock. About the time we were ready to put McCoy in, a buffalo hunter, Watson by name, drove up. He had been following the O'Neel boys' trail. They knew each other well. He was also just down from Kansas. We then had plenty of help.

Watson had a pick in his outfit, so we managed to dig a grave about three feet deep, put him in and covered the grave with rocks. The O'Neel boys loaded up and pulled for the McKenzie trail. I

gave them directions how to get to the Lee Reynolds and Wrath trading post. I got back to camp late, having helped to put away two who were killed in that blizzard.

The cause of the accident must have been the building of a big fire under the gyp rock. The rock thawed and fell. If it had been in the night it would have killed all of these men.

Later I got well acquainted with the O'Neels. They had both been artillery drivers with the McKenzie expedition against the Comanches. Just after the buffalo hunt was over the U. S. made a kind of demonstration into Mexico. It was called the Cutting affair. Doc went with it. The U. S. troops were on the east bank of the Rio Grande. Some Mexicans were on the west side calling over the river, making all kinds of insulting gestures. Doc said, "I'll get that hombre," and pointed to one, half a mile off. He cut down on the Mexican; cut him in two with the first shot of his old Sharps .45. Doc was later killed in the Geronimo raids in Arizona. Tom died on the Cimmarron years ago; had a nice little herd of cattle.

N THE break of the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos, about the south line of Haskell County or the north line of Jones County, Texas, there's a hill we used to call Flat Top, just off the McKenzie Trail. At the base of this hill there was a freshwater spring, making it a good place to camp.

On one trip going to Fort Griffin we saw two men camped near this spring. The next time I passed there they had built a house, a kind of adobe outfit of three rooms. Each man used one of the end rooms, the middle room being a kitchen or place to cook. We could not talk to them. They spoke nothing but French and had not much to say to anyone—a queer pair.

On a trip hauling hides to Griffin in the spring of '77, my brother and I aimed to camp at noon at this spring. When we pulled in we saw something out of the ordinary was on, in front of the house. When we had hobbled the horses and turned the oxen loose, we walked down to see what was doing. When we got there one of the men, who later turned out to be a servant, had the dead man rolled up in a buffalo hide, was sitting astride the corpse and sewing him up in the hide.

My brother, who could talk a little French, managed to get this story out of him. We first helped to bury the man, however, the grave being already dug. The dead man was a man of title from Switzerland; had been with Garibaldi and was a political refugee. The other man was his servant and had come over here with him. They had wandered around the U. S. and finally got out west of Fort Griffin on the buffalo range. This count, or whatever his title may have been, was a dope fiend and had taken an overdose of morphine which wound him up.

We pulled on that evening to Paint Creek and so on to Griffin. By the time we got there a deputy sheriff was ready

to start out to get the servant, which he did. The deputy brought everything in and held the man on the charge of poisoning the count.

My brother told the Justice of Peace at Griffin what he had got out of the servant and that he believed his story to be true. The authorities still had the man when we left. We heard they gave him a good scare, said they would hang him, but finally gave him a chance to get away, which he did.

The sheriff's deputy and others di-

vided up what little there was and the matter was soon forgotten. I never heard what became of the man, only that he went East. The count or what is left of him and his buffalo hide shroud are still there. I should say there is no trace of the grave now as wind and rain —erosion—have long since done their work.

DURING the winter of 1877 several small cowmen moved their cattle from Coleman County onto a creek called Live Oak which runs into the Colorado River in Runnels County. The buffalo had been killed off; what remnant was left was on the plains country to the west. These men were camped together for protection and mutual work with the cattle.

There were still a few small bands of Indians occasionally leaving their reservation at Fort Sill to steal horses and raid as far as the Rio Grande. One morning in the spring of 1878 three of these cowmen left camp to ride their line. There were no fences, just line riders to keep the cattle on certain creeks so they would not scatter too far. Shorty Brown, Medley and Sims were the names of these men. After riding several miles they reached the top of a hill from which they could see a big scope of country. Looking to the west, they saw several men driving a bunch of horses. They could not make out whether the riders were white or Indians, so they dropped back out of sight behind the hill, crawled back up and watched until they could identify the strangers.

On getting near, the cowmen saw that it was a party of seven Indians. The white boys were well armed and now was the time to get a bunch of ponies and possibly a scalp or two. So here they went in pursuit. One Indian was in the lead, the others whipping up the horses. It was apparent the boys would soon be in easy range of them. The Indians turned into a long, wide draw which had some dry water holes in the center and grass stirrup high. Just as they passed the head of a pour-off one Indian dropped off his horse. The boys had to cross at the same place, but they never saw the Indian slip off his horse.

Here they came, Brown in the lead. Just as he passed not ten feet from where the Indian was hiding, the latter shot Brown—a dead shot. Medley was right behind; the Indian gave him a bad wound, but not a fatal one. Sims saw them both hit and pulled off to the side. The Indian shot at him but missed. Brown fell near where he was shot, was dead when he hit the ground. Medley hung on to his horse till out of range. Brown's horse stopped. The Indian jumped out of the hole, caught the horse, picked up Brown's pistol and was gone.

He crossed over to where the other Indians were waiting to see how he came out of the fight. They crowed like roosters, gobbled like turkeys and made all kinds of gestures at the white men, turned and were gone.

Sims did all he could for the wounded Medley, made sure the Indians had gone then, rode as fast as he could to camp. Some of the others were there. He and one more got a team hitched up, got to Medley quick as they could, and got him to camp. Medley finally recovered and did not die until just a few years ago, an old man.

They buried Brown on range. Sims is also dead now—died some years ago. But here is the wonderful part of the affair. That Indian was armed with an old cap and ball pistol. I have known these old pistols to fire all their shots at one time. This one could easily have mis-fired. Just think what a terrible chance he took dropping off his horse to fight three well armed white men with no chance of getting away. All the white men were good shots; any one of them could and would have killed him in an open fight. I think it was taking the most desperate chance I ever heard of. This is a true story and men are living today who know it as well as I do. I talked to Sims several times about it.

He hated to talk of it, but said those were the straight facts.

No one saw the Indians again. They made it to the reservation two hundred and fifty miles to the north.

IN THE summer of 1877 Pete Snyder had established a hunters' supply and trading post on Deep Creek, now Scurry County, Texas. For three years previous it had been the Moore brothers' headquarters buffalo camp, where they had killed anywhere from 10,000 to 15,000 buffalo, and put up meat during the winter hunt. They were very successful hunters. They had come down from Kansas when the buffalo were killed off there.

Wright Moore had the reputation of killing the only white buffalo I ever heard of. I saw the hide. It was not a pure white—more of a cream color—and a fine hide.

General McKenzie had passed up this creek on his expedition against the Comanches; left a big trail which was in use a long time. This Snyder camp soon had all that went with a hunters' supply camp—saloons, gambling hall, dance hall and the usual supply of women.

About Christmas a hunter, McClosky by name, came in for supplies and a week's spree. He was about out of money; had been drinking and was in an ugly mood when he went into the gambling joint. A small man who went by the name of Chuckaluck Jack was running a game. He was a harmless individual. McClosky commenced to play the game. He soon lost what few dollars he had. Without a word he reached over the table, caught Jack by the coat, jerked him toward himself, reached to his belt, pulled a big ripping knife and stuck it into Jack's back repeatedly. Jack was dead when McClosky let him go.

McClosky turned and left the place. Just as soon as the crowd realized what had taken place, they took after him. No one saw which way he went. They were about to quit looking for him when Jim Ennis, also a hunter, thought he might have jumped into a big water hole just west of the camp. Jim got in the shade of some brush and watched the water hole. It was a fine moonlight night. He thought he saw a ripple on the other side in the shade of some willow brush. He took a shot at the ripple and got McClosky in the leg. His leg broken, McClosky gave up with a big squall. The other men were soon there, pulled him out and carried him to a saloon.

He wanted whiskey. He got all he wanted. He told the men in the saloon to get his team and take him to Fort Griffin nearly two hundred miles away, where there was a doctor. He could stand his trial then. They would not do much to him, he thought, for killing a chuckaluck dealer.

In a short time he had a very different idea. One of the men had procured a rope by then. They told him, "We are ready to take you to Griffin; you've seen the doctor and had your trial." He begged, cried and cussed. They half carried and half dragged him north of the camp where there was a big grove of China-berry trees. They roped one of these trees, bent it down, tied one end of the rope to it and let the tree spring back. The other end of the rope was noosed about McClosky's neck. The tree raised him well off the ground where they left him hanging. Then they went back to the saloon to celebrate the first hanging at Snyder, which is now the county seat of Scurry County.

The next morning they dug two graves, wrapped Jack in a wagon sheet, put him in one, cut McClosky down and dropped him in the other, just as he was, making a good clean job of it with no cost to anyone.

About twenty-five or thirty years ago some men were digging a foundation for a schoolhouse and found the skeletons and reported in the papers it was the remains of some horse thieves, hung in an early day.

There were a good many violent deaths like these on the Frontier, but little or no sickness.

OUT OF THE

Editor's Note:

Tex Sherman, who gives us the latest news of the rodeo world, is a real Westerner. He has punched cows and broken horses throughout the West. He has been rodeo contestant and judge himself, and only last year announced the rodeo in Kansas City.

He is willing to answer any questions you may have concerning any rodeo or any cowboy or cowgirl contestant. Don't hesitate to write and ask him for information about the rodeo game. Be sure, however, to enclose stamps for reply.

The rodeo's on, folks. Here they come, "Out of the Chutes" and into the arena, Tex Sherman announcing!

FIFTEEN years ago the merchants of Wolf Point, Montana, put on a roping and riding show for the neighboring range folk. That small one-day event grew into one of the Northwest's best annual rodeos, and now thousands of seats are being added to the grandstand to accommodate the many people that had to be turned away this year. O. C. Johnson, secretary, has put this rodeo in the fore.

Wolf Point is near several Indian Reservations, and many of these young bucks enter the events to carry the prize monies back to their wigwams. Two thousand of them took part in last year's colorful parade.

Homer Holcomb, renowned rodeo clown, has broken his shoulder again—that same shoulder he snapped before. Several movie scouts saw Homer work at the Los Angeles rodeo and made him tempting offers to appear in comedies before his new season starts, but this accident will prevent him from making Hollywood history right now.

Hoot Gibson, many years a rodeo top-hand and producer of the Hoot Gibson Ranch Rodeo, will make eight Western pictures this year and between pictures he will stage championship rodeos. Hoot intends to join the Rodeo Association of America. Hoot and I were dickering with a party in Florida about putting on a huge world's championship rodeo, but when we demanded that money be placed in the bank to insure the payment of contestants' prizes and all local bills, the project fell through. After years of publicly demanding such protection for contestants, Hoot and I would certainly not lend our names to any rodeo that didn't give it to the cowboys and girls.

Despite the fact that Tex Ritter is busy making his third picture in Hollywood, he will still be seen at some of the rodeos. A clause in his movie contract permits him to compete at the Cheyenne Frontier Days' Celebration, the Prescott Frontier Days, the Chicago Stadium Rodeo and the Madison Square Garden Rodeo. Tex is also technical director of his latest moving picture, working under Lindsay Hirsch, co-producer.

The Chandler, Arizona, Rodeo, housed in its modern grandstand and arena, saw some fast work. Jackie Cooper, cowboy, took first money in the bronc-riding. Tom Ribelin won the all-around junior cowboy championship for 1936. Tom Breedon bulldogged a steer in five seconds flat, which started the ball speeding. Pat Woods, riding against doctor's orders, put on a classic exhibition of bronc-riding. He rode "Booger Red," famous and terrible bucker, to a standstill.

The big red bronc jumped at the sky and did some wild and fancy pitching, but Pat rode him to a fare-thee-well. Jack Dew, arena director, has been busy receiving well earned congratulations since on his grand-slam show.

These new Chandler grounds have won the admiration of all the rodeo contestants who have seen them. I have received quite a number of letters from the cowboys, telling me it is one of the best arenas they have seen. Two special events were particularly enjoyed by the crowd. These were the Amateur Greenhorn Calf Tying and the Boys' Calf Tying and Steer Riding Contest.

Some tough Brahma steers roughed up Smoky Snyder and Pat Woods at Chandler, slightly injuring them, but they both came back for more and both landed in the money. Mel Stonehouse was thrown by a bronc and gamefully staged a comeback, but Bill Chick was more seriously injured, suffering a broken ankle. Buckshot Sorrells won the greatest amount of prize money and since he was competing against such cowboys as Earle Thode, Smoky Snyder and Howard McCrory, you'll know what a top-hand Buckshot is.

Here are the final winners in all the major events:

Team Roping: 1. Buck Sorrells and Johnnie Rhodes; 2. G. Cline and L. Burkdoll; 3. A. Altamarino and Breezy Cox.

Steer Wrestling: (4 steers) 1. Howard McCrory, 27-4; 2. Oral Zumwalt, 27-6; 3. Holloway Grace, 28-2.

Calf Roping: (4 calves) 1. Hugh Clingman, 84-4; 2. Buck Sorrells, 88-4; 3. Everett Bowman, 90.

Bronc Riding with saddle: 1. Jackie Cooper; 2. Earl Thode; 3. Floyd Stillings and Pat Woods splitting third money.

"Snakes," famous bucking horse, died at Leo Cramer's Shawmut, Montana, ranch the other day. "Snakes" was thirty years old, but still feared by some of the best bronc riders in the game.

A new rodeo organization has been formed down South, with headquarters at Columbus, Mississippi, with Cameron Nixon, owner of the Forked Lightning Ranch Rodeo, in the vanguard.

One of the most gruesome jobs ever undertaken by cowboys was the removal of the bodies of the twelve victims of the fatal airplane crash near Burbank, California, recently. Chick Hannon, Fox O'Callahan, Lee Ferris (he's that Canada Kid), Ed Jaruejui, Doc Van Horn and a few others, loaded the bodies on pack horses and took them from the gully where the airplane cracked up, to the top of a mountain where faster transportation could be had.

Lloyd Schermerhorn, trick rider and roper, is finishing up his winter at Kalamazoo, Michigan, and he's been seen practicing up many new tricks in both riding and roping. If Lloyd is any better and speedier when he hits the arenas again, I'll have to dig myself up some new and louder adjectives.

Casa Grande, Arizona, can boast of a rodeo outfit composed entirely of famous cowboy stars. Earl Thode, the greatest all-around hand in the game, is ramrodding the crew. Each major event has a purse of two hundred dollars with all entry fees added to the purse. Team roping, however, is "jackpot," that is, the ropers will put up their "win" purse, and steer riding has a purse of one hundred dollars with entry fee added. Harry Powell furnishes the stock for this grand little rodeo.

I've waited all year to tell you this because now that leap year is over, it will be safer and Mayor Peery won't be stampeded. All during the past year Mayor Peery of Ogden, Utah, has been marrying couples free of charge and couples from all over the West

have been flocking to him. It's too bad, but you'll just have to wait another four years now.

Ray Whitley, who took New Yorkers by storm with his cowboy singers, has been bagged by the Republic Pictures Corporation to make some Westerns. It was Ray who introduced "The Last Round-Up" in New York a few years ago during the World Series Rodeo, and in one week you couldn't go anywhere without hearing someone murdering it.

The Riding Actors Association, which is composed of cowboys who have seen real action in arenas, has just elected new officers for 1937. Cliff Smith, who rode broncs twenty-five years ago in the old Buffalo Bill Wild West Show, was elected president. Ed Clay was made vice-president; Len Sowards, treasurer; Johnnie Judd, secretary. The directors are Buck Bucko, Fargo Hussey, Bob Burns, "Slim" Balch, Henry Morris and George Sowards.

Buck Moulton, the retiring president, was given a bang-up dinner by the gang. Buck is one of the best all-around rodeo stars. He is backing the Association's movement to make all the major studios recognize the association. When that is accomplished you will see Western movies as Western movies should really be.

Speaking of the movies, the world's youngest cowboy has laid aside his spurs and ten-gallon hat for a featured role in the movies. Little Dickie Jones was discovered by Hoot Gibson in Texas when he climbed up on the arena fence three years ago and yelled at Hoot to give him a ride.

Dickie is eight years old and has just finished working as one of the principals in the cast of "The Trial Horse." He also appears in "Wonder Bar" with Al Jolson, "Moonlight on the Prairie," "Daniel Boone," and "Black Legion." His trick riding and roping, as well as his acting, are something to watch out for.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

Rodeo Fans' Association

Tex Sherman, *Director*

Executive Committee

Fred McCarger, *secretary of the Rodeo Association of America*
Frank Moore, *manager of the Madison Square Garden Rodeo*
Grace Sparks, *secretary of the Prescott Frontier Days*
Harmon W. Peery, *mayor of Ogden, Utah*
Charlie Murphy, *arena director of the Livingston Round-Up*
Roy Ritner, *secretary of the Pendleton Round-Up*
Robert D. Hanesworth, *secretary of the Cheyenne Frontier Days*
L. C. Morrison, *manager of the Black Hills Round-Up*

RODEO FANS' ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I hereby pledge my support to the cause of clean sportsmanship and the rodeo game.

(Miss)
(Mrs.)
(Mr.)

Name.....

Address.....

.....

I enclose ten cents for the Rodeo Fans' Association pin.

Rodeo Fans' Association, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.

3-19-37

Trail's End Roll Call

Here, folks, are some more new members to welcome into your club:

Mr. Maurice Abrams, Iroquois, Ont., Canada
Mr. Clarence Alexander, Vinton, Calif.
Mr. Herbert Atkinson, c/o D. Ferguson, Cochrane, Ont., Canada
Miss Madge Atkinson, 477 Hancock, W. Detroit, Mich.
Mrs. Ruby Babcock, 88 West St., Spring Valley, N. Y.
Miss Jayne Bashness, 246 N. George St., York, Penna.
Mr. George Beck, Co. K, 10th Inf., Fort Thomas, Ky.
Mr. Edward Bilderback, 1422 Isabel St., Los Angeles, Calif.
Mr. Robert Blevins, Superior, W. Va.
Miss Mattie Boan, R. 2, Watova, Okla.
Mr. John Bogel, 122 W. Washington St., Fort Wayne, Ind.
Miss Mary Bradley, Chelyan, W. Va.
Mr. Duard Bradshaw, Yonkers, Okla.
Mr. R. E. Bridges, 217 Lineberger St., Shelby, N. C.
Mrs. Herbert Brockway, Gays Mills, Wisc.
Miss Laurette Brodeur, Village St., Millis, Mass.
Mr. Guy Brown, Btry. I, 64th C. A., Fort Shafter, Hawaii
Mr. Rocky Buccafuri, Co. G, 14th Inf., Fort Davis, Panama Canal Zone
Mr. Maxwell Bullis, Sheldon Springs, Vt.
Miss S. Butler, York Cafe, Dawlish, Devon, England
Mr. Melvin Carlson, 314 E. Liberty Ave., Spokane, Wash.
Mr. Amos Carvell, 114 Lancaster St., West St. John, N. B., Canada
Miss Barbara Chateau, 220 Delaware St., Vallejo, Calif.
Mr. Hal Collar, 2111 S. 8th Ct., Birmingham, Ala.
Miss Mary Columbus, R. 1, Box 106, Leland, Miss.
Miss Hazel Connell, Bruce Mines, Ont., Canada
Miss Margaret Coutts, Pine Ridge, Ore.
Mrs. Cassel Craiger, Partridge, Ky.
Mr. Bill Croft, 311 Toronto St., Winnipeg, Man., Canada
Miss Mary Lou Doom, R. 3, Kuttawa, Ky.
Miss Susie Driver, R. 3, Corinth, Miss.
Miss Bonnie Dunlavey, 546 N. 4th St., San Jose, Calif.
Mr. James Eddings, Fort Morgan, Mobile, Ala.
Mr. John Fox, Sand Springs, Mont.
Pvt. Charles Fraser, HQ. Wing, Signal Section, 2nd Bn. Highland Light Inf., Peshaw, A. R., India
Miss Frances Frazier, 801 N. Irving St., Arlington, Va.
Mr. Henry Golembiewski, 126 Church St., Middletown, Conn.
Miss Dorothy Goodrich, 4022 E. 52nd St., Maywood, Calif.
Miss Enid Gonser, Idana, Kans.
Mr. Arthur Grant, 1950 N. Argyle Ave., Hollywood, Calif.
Miss Elizabeth Mae Hall, 524 Sherman St., Elkhart, Ind.
Mr. Roy Heisler, 781 Pelham St., St. Paul, Minn.
Mr. J. Edward Hibbard, Box 23, McWhorter, Ky.
Miss Joyce Hudson, 34 Old Sandgate Rd., Brisbane, Queensland, Australia
Miss Wanda Lancaster, 16 S. 5th St., San Jose, Calif.
Miss Lila B. Little, 308 W. Prospect Ave., St. Louis, Mich.
Mr. Tauno Lundgren, 629 Ontario St., Sudbury, Ont., Canada
Mr. Sam Manning, 527 E. Powell St., Yazoo City, Miss.
Mr. Joseph McClintock, R. 1, Hallowell, Me.
Mr. John A. O'Hara, 6 Stuart Crecent, Wood Green, London, N. 22, England
Miss Lois Pearson, 88 Franklin St., Napa, Calif.
Miss Winona Peterson, Lark, Utah
Miss Rose Quillan, 217 Carnwadrick Rd., Thorny Bank, Glasgow, Scotland
Miss Pauline Ramsey, Somerset, Ky.
Miss Virginia Reese, R. 1, Gibsonville, N. C.
Miss Laura Robinson, R. 3, Kuttawa, Ky.
Mr. John Ruble, 114½ E. Cedar, Rawlins, Wyo.
Mr. Harry Ruppert, Bldg. 63, Fort Shafter, Honolulu, Hawaii
Mr. Laurie Ryan, New Zealand Railways, Waitoa, New Zealand
Miss Helena Sadowski, 501 Prospect St., Nutley, N. J.
Mrs. Martha Schlarp, 512 East St., N. S., Pittsburgh, Penna.
Miss Gertrude Schum, 2347 Quebec Rd., Cincinnati, Ohio
Miss Rosella Schwab, 814 Cleveland Ave., Hamilton, Ohio
Mr. William Sells, 4 Pakenham St., London, W. C. 1, England
Mr. C. G. Shepherd, Farmersville, Calif.
Mr. Harry Shockey, Galt, Mo.
Miss Viola Short, c/o J. Kirk, Cheap, Ky.
Mr. Charlei R. Sigala, Box 37, Castroville, Calif.
Miss Margaret Slaughter, 344 Atlantic Ave., Knoxville, Tenn.
Mr. Arnold Sletten, Sedan, Minn.

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES.
I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.

(*Miss*)
(*Mrs.*)
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Address.....

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This coupon makes you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.
Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.
Address your letter: Trail's End Club, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.
Please *print* your name and address plainly.

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"OUR AIR MAIL" is running daily among the readers of RANCH ROMANCES in all parts of the world. Its purpose is to help readers make friends with people everywhere, near and far, at home and abroad.

You may write directly to anyone whose letter you find printed in this department. Remember, however, that all letters should reflect the clean, wholesome spirit of RANCH ROMANCES and contain nothing objectionable.

Moreover, this department is intended only for those people who actually wish correspondents. We ask you therefore to refrain from using it as a medium for playing practical jokes, and particularly ask you not to sign your letters with other people's names.

With Hope in Her Heart

Dear Editor:

With hope in my heart I am trying to crash the gates. RANCH ROMANCES is tops with me. I am nineteen years old, five feet five inches tall and have brown eyes and hair. I like dancing, movies, music, writing, all sports, and life itself. I would like very much to sit right down and write some pen pals some letters. Pen pals, this is a plea. Don't leave me out in the cold.

Sincerely,
YOLANDA PERRY.

Box 136,
Dayton, Nev.

He Wants Postmarks

Dear Editor:

I have read the Double R for years and consider it the best of them all. I am twenty-one years old, and have dark brown hair and eyes. I am usually called "Shorty." I would like to hear from you boys and girls from sixteen to twenty-two, anywhere in the world. I like to hunt, fish and collect postmarks. If you have any postmarks, please send them all. I will appreciate it very much.

Sincerely,
JOHN HICKMAN.

7100 S. E. 68th Ave.,
Portland, Ore.

Three C.C.C. Boys

Dear Editor:

We are three lonely C.C.C. boys from the East and we haven't been home from over a year. It is very lonesome in the Northwest.

John is twenty and has dark hair, blue eyes and stands five feet eight inches. Joe is twenty-one and has dark curly hair and is five feet six inches tall. Herbert is also twenty-one and has black hair, blue eyes and stands five feet eight inches. We will answer all letters received.

Sincerely,
JOHN GRAMES,
JOE PLUNKETT,
HERBERT PERKINS.

CCC Co. 574,
Camp Cavern,
State Park 3,
Whitehall, Mont.

"Enjoyed Every Number"

Dear Editor:

I have read R.R. since the April, 1935, issue and enjoyed every bit of every number. I am very lonely and desire very much to correspond with pen pals all over the world. I am twenty years old and have blond hair and blue eyes. Hoping I may hear from many of you, I am,

Sincerely,
EDWIN PROGIN.

CCC Co. 2114,
Moro, Ore.

Lonely Little Southerner

Dear Editor:

I like to read very much and the stories I most enjoy are between the covers of R.R. I am seventeen years old, have curly brown hair and brown eyes. I really need pen pals and anyone who writes will receive a reply. I would especially like to hear from cowboys. Come on and write to a lonely little Southerner who is very fond of horses.

Sincerely,
MISS TONI MITCHELL.

Barton, La.

Vermont Miss

Dear Editor:

Here comes my second attempt. I'll keep on writing until you do print one of my letters in "Our Air Mail." I am twenty years old and slender. I have brown hair and brown eyes. I like most all kinds of sports. I would like to hear from folks all over the world. I'll be glad to exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
FLORABELL OVITT.

R. 2,
Four Corners,
Northfield, Vt.

Works in Logging Camp

Dear Editor:

How's chances for a bunch of pen pals? I am twenty years old, five feet ten inches tall and have gray eyes and brown hair. I am a fireman in a logging camp in the Lake Cowichan district of Vancouver. The mail way out here is a big event and I have lots of time to answer letters. Wishing R.R. the best of luck,

Sincerely,
ANGUS McMILLAN.

Camp 3,
Youbou, B. C.,
Canada

The California Culls

Dear Editor:

Please put our names in "Our Air Mail." We have read RANCH ROMANCES for five years and enjoy it a great deal. Ella is eighteen years old, five feet three inches tall and has brown hair and blue-gray eyes. Walter is sixteen years old and has blue eyes and dark hair. We promise to answer all letters.

Sincerely,
ELLA CULL,
WALTER CULL.

R. 2, Box 36,
Kerman, Calif.

Liven Up His Cold Winter

Dear Editor:

Here I come again, trying to break into your vast circle. "Our Air Mail" must be a very popular page as I have not seen any of my pleas printed yet. I am very desirous of getting some real pen pals. I am willing to answer all letters received. Please, Editor, give me a break and help liven up the Ontario winter.

Sincerely,
RUSSEL GOLE.

R. 1,
West Monkton, Ont.,
Canada

Liked "Tired Tornado"

Dear Editor:

When I first read RANCH ROMANCES just a short time ago I was so enthused over the story, "TIRED TORNADO," that I thought I would write to you. I am a lonesome sailor, twenty-five years old and have curly black hair and brown eyes. I am about five feet eleven inches tall. I very seldom go ashore and so have lots of time to write letters. I am willing to exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
CHARLES M. SWAN.

"S" Division,
U. S. S. Oklahoma,
San Pedro, Calif.

Edwin's Impatient!

Dear Editor:

This is my third letter to you, trying to get in "Our Air Mail," and I don't think it's right you haven't published any of my letters. I would enjoy having some pen pals. Just one more thing, I wish you would have RANCH ROMANCES published once a week, Editor.

Sincerely,
EDWIN WIEST.

902 E. Madison St.,
Louisville, Ky.

"Raiders of Lost River"

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for about eight years and I think it is the best magazine anyone could buy. I thought "Raiders of Lost River" was a particularly excellent story. I would like very much to have some pen pals between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five. I will exchange snaps. Come on and write to a lonely chap from Illinois.

Sincerely,
HERBERT MADISON.

R. 1,
Hardin, Ill.

Lives in Logging Camp Town

Dear Editor:

Here is an S.O.S. from a little logging camp in the far West. I am quite lonely and would like to hear from pen pals, especially those in foreign countries. I am a devoted reader of RANCH ROMANCES and claim it the best Western magazine on the market. I am a sixteen-year-old girl, tall and slim and have brown, curly hair and blue eyes. My hobbies are reading, writing, hiking, driving a car and collecting songs.

Sincerely,

LELA REPPETO.

Box 65,
Ryderwood, Wash.

Young Georgia Miss

Dear Editor:

I am a reader of the Double R and I like the magazine very much. I am tall and slender and thirteen years old. I wish to get in "Our Air Mail."

Sincerely,

JEAN TAYLOR.

R. 1, Box 30,
Tiger, Ga.

Scotch Lass Reserves R.R. Copies

Dear Editor:

Living in Scotland, I don't get my RANCH ROMANCES until about a month after publication, but to make that sure I always reserve my copy. I would especially like to have pen pals from America and Canada. I am eighteen years old, interested in writing and reading and almost everything. Please give a wee Scotch lassie a break.

Sincerely,

PATRICIA KELSO.

19 Inverness St.,
West Drumogue,
Glasgow, S.W. 1,
Scotland

Spirit of the West

Dear Editor:

I have lived in Oklahoma all my life and I have an extensive knowledge of it. I would like to congratulate you for keeping RANCH ROMANCES in the true spirit of the West. I am a high school student, fifteen years old. I am interested in all sports and collecting Indian relics. I would like to have some correspondents.

Sincerely,

MAX BIGGS, JR.

R. 1,
Chickasha, Okla.

Interested in Crime Detection

Dear Editor:

RANCH ROMANCES sure does make a hit with everyone whom I induce to try it. I have answered as many letters as I could and now I want everyone to write to me. I am twenty-three years old, six feet tall, and I am interested in scientific crime detection, although the West is in my blood. I spent six months in Texas and being fond of all animals I sure hated to come back to the city.

Sincerely,

JERRY PLZAK.

2011 Lansing Ave.,
Detroit, Mich.

Lives on Cow Ranch

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of R.R. for a number of years and I enjoy the yarns. I have noticed only a very few letters from New Mexico in "Our Air Mail." How about it? I have written to many of the people who have had their letters published, and now I think, Editor, it is my turn. I live on a cow ranch.

Sincerely,

OLA BAIRD.

Cloudcroft, N. M.

Do You Like Bracelets?

Do you want one of the lovely Trail's End bracelets pictured below? On each of these beautiful pieces of jewelry is the insignia of the Trail's End Club, and the bracelet costs only twenty-five cents.

If you desire one, send this coupon, together with twenty-five cents, to the Trail's End Editor, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York.

I am a member of the Trail's End Club.

I am enclosing twenty-five cents ($.25), for which please send me one Trail's End bracelet.

Name .....

Street or Route Address.....

City and State.....

Please print your name and address plainly.

Address your letter: Trail's End Club, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.

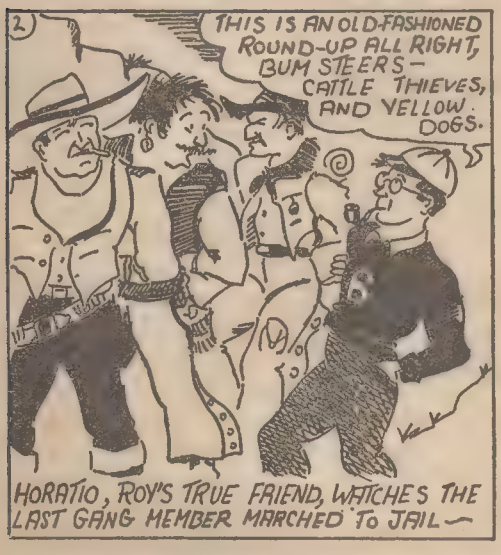
3-19-37

NO. XIX

ROMANCE RANCH

BY A.F. HOPKINS
AND R.E. HOVEY

THE STORY SO FAR—
AFTER A GALLANT BATTLE WITH THE DESPERATE OUTLAWS WHO HAVE TRIED TO RUIN HIS UNCLE'S RANCH, ROY IS HOPING MOLLY, THE FOREMAN'S DAUGHTER, WILL ANSWER "YES" WHEN HE MANAGES TO POP THE QUESTION!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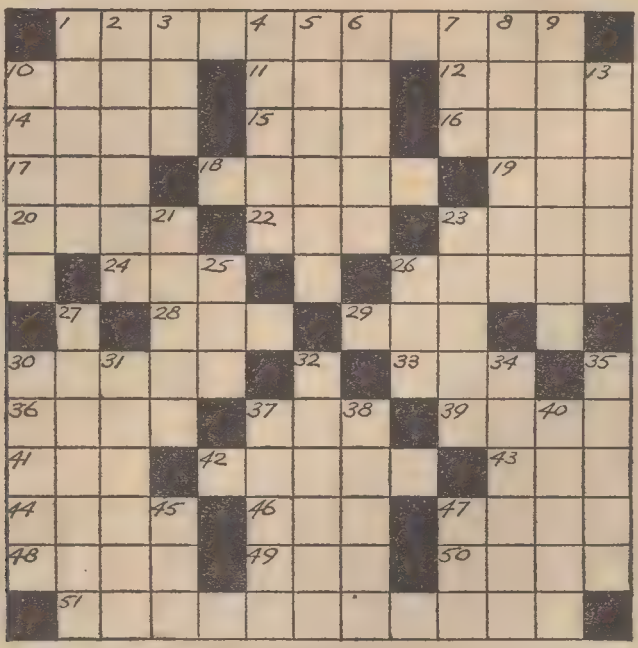
THIS IS AN OLD-FASHIONED ROUND-UP ALL RIGHT, BUM STEERS— CATTLE THIEVES, AND YELLOW DOGS.
HORATIO, ROY'S TRUE FRIEND, WATCHES THE LAST GANG MEMBER MARCHED TO JAIL—

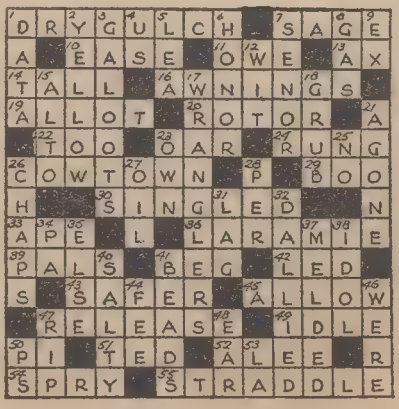
. . The Westerners' Crossword Puzzle . .



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

Across

1. An ox driver
10. A Spanish lady
11. Possessed
12. The middle of March
14. From a place
15. Old (Poetic)
16. Orderly
17. A curved chest bone
18. To change
19. Twice five
20. To narrate
22. Through, by or for
23. A child's top
24. An auditory organ
26. Made well
28. A horse
29. A bag or pouch
30. Sticky
33. Percent (Abbr.)
36. A term used in hailing
37. A tin container
39. Pertaining to the air
41. A noisy quarrel
42. A hornless cow
43. An insect egg
44. A show of magnificence
46. To bend
47. A flat-bottomed boat
48. A heavenly body
49. Before
50. A drunken revel
51. Shrubs having white berries



Solution to First March puzzle

Down

1. A kind of knife
2. Not able
3. To recline
4. A contemptible person
5. Stood still
6. A venomous snake
7. A set of tools
8. One who edits
9. Angry
10. Barbed shafts
13. A church council
21. Tall and slender
23. A kind of Western vegetation
25. A line of light
26. To crown
27. In partnership
30. Short for tarpaulins
31. A rancher
32. In great numbers
34. The act of holding
35. Half-witted
37. An aromatic berry
38. Fresher
40. Metal circlets
45. Short for professional
47. A Hawaiian food

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

By Professor Marcus Mari

The Pisces Man

UNDER the sign of Pisces, the Fish, which rules from the 19th of February to the 21st of March, are born men in whom a love of peace and harmony is deeply ingrained.

Although these men shrink from self-assertion, or anything that savors of swagger and bumptiousness, they are not vacillating. Rather they are dreamy, sensitive—almost super-sensitive—receptive to all impressions, and strangely in tune with the universe of beauty.

Often they make serious mistakes by relying on what is told them, instead of developing and holding fast to the dictums of their own good common sense. They are outspoken, at the same time rather shy, preferring quiet to controversy, clinging to their ideals, living as far as may be in their own emotional experiences, apart from the hurly-burly of the world today.

Normally good humored, even genial, they can flare up when the occasion demands, and will fight grimly in the interests of their friends or of a cause which has enlisted their swift, generous sympathies. For themselves, they are not so quick to fight, verbally or otherwise. They seem to live for others, to want to do good to others, to make others happy.

Honor, justice, fair play, are more than mere words to them. They have a strict code; they finish what they start, even though it be distasteful, working carefully, conscientiously, and above all, intelligently, at whatever occupation may be theirs.

The Pisces man is naturally trustful. The reaction, if he finds that his trust has been betrayed, is frequently serious. He may become gloomy and morose, convinced that the world is against him. But ordinarily, he is an extremely charming fellow, sincere, tender, agreeable, with a gift for story-telling which makes him a most delightful companion, and an imagination that can weave threads of romance into the dullest of gray days.

In business he should be successful in anything that has to do with ships, railroads, automobiles—the moving thing, the thing that spells change, not the mere mechanics of it. His creative ability, coupled with his wonderful response to rhythm, may lead him to excel in writing, painting or musical compositions.

He should find his mate in a girl born under the sign of Aries, Cancer, Virgo or Scorpio. His friends, too, for whom he cares the most will probably be born under these signs.

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends him this coupon in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Avenue, New York. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name..... Sex.....

Address.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date..... 3-19-37

In the next issue Professor Mari will analyze women born between March 22nd and April 21st.

A very remarkable picture

To photograph a live wild eagle is an achievement to be proud of. The photographer is justifiably proud of this striking picture, and has had a beautiful 8" x 10" enlargement made of it of which she is also proud. It cost her 25¢.

An 8" x 10" enlargement of your favorite photograph, 25c

and two coupons from Ranch Romances!

Somewhere you have a small photograph of someone dear to you that you think the world of, or a picture, like this eagle, that is very unusual and hard to make.

Take this opportunity to get a fine enlargement of it for a fraction of what it would cost you at a photographer's store. You'll be amazed to see how much clearer and better in every way the enlargement is. Fill in the coupon below with your name and address, and put it away carefully. When you get the next issue of Ranch Romances two weeks from now, cut out the coupon from that issue, attach the two coupons to your photograph (send the negative if you have it), and mail to us with 25 cents in U. S. stamps or coin.

An enlargement measuring eight by ten inches will go to you in a few days, and your photograph will be returned at the same time. We'll return your money if a good clear enlargement cannot be made from your photograph.

You can have as many enlargements of one picture as you want, or enlargements of as many pictures as you want, at 25 cents each; **but you must send us two of these coupons for each enlargement ordered.**

If you would like your enlargements tinted, enclose 50 cents instead of 25 cents and a beautifully colored enlargement will be sent you.

Tell your friends about this opportunity. They may be greatly pleased to know about it.

RANCH ROMANCES, 37
Dept. D, 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.

I enclose.....¢ and two coupons. Send me one 8 by 10 inch { plain / colored } enlargement of the attached photograph, returning the photograph at the same time.

Please Print

Name.....

Street and No.....

City..... State.....

The TRUE EXPERIENCE of PAUL SHEA

OF SPRINGFIELD, N.J.

I HATE TAKING THIS FACE ANYWHERE!

READ PAUL'S OWN STORY

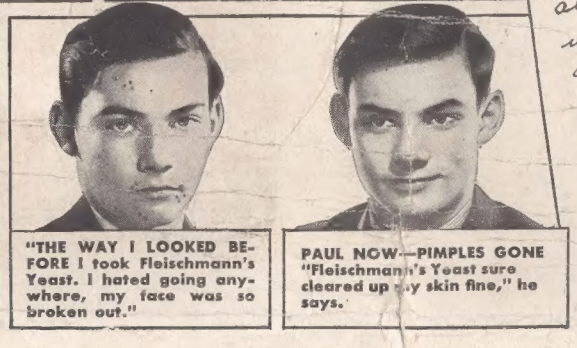
C'MON FELLERS—LET'S TRY THAT OVER—YOU'LL HAVE TO GIVE IT MORE ZIP IF WE'RE GOING TO GET THAT RADIO TRYOUT
S'POSE THAT MEANS ME—BET HE COULDN'T DO ANY BETTER IF HE HAD THE BIG BLOSSOM I'VE GOT BESIDE MY MOUTH—GOSH! IT HURTS EVERY TIME I BLOW A NOTE!

FOR GOODNESS SAKE PAUL—WHAT'S GOT INTO YOU LATELY—I NEVER KNEW YOU TO SIT AROUND HOME THIS WAY—DON'T YOU FEEL WELL?
OH—I'M ALL RIGHT MUM—ONLY, WELL—A GUY DOESN'T MUCH LIKE GOING AROUND WITH A PIMPLY FACE LIKE THIS!

I WONDER IF FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST WOULDN'T HELP YOU? I'M GOING TO GET YOU SOME—IT'S WHAT A SKIN DOCTOR TOLD LAURA TO EAT—AND SHE SAID IT WAS WONDERFUL
IT SURE IS WONDERFUL IF IT REALLY WORKS

LATER
ALL READY, SON? DAD SAYS HE'LL DRIVE US OVER TO THAT RADIO AUDITION
O.K.—SAY, MUM—THOSE YEAST CAKES ARE THE STUFF. ALL RIGHT—LOOK—THERE'S NOT A HICKIE LEFT—

PAUL, YOU WERE SWELL—I NEVER HEARD YOU PLAY BETTER
THANKS—I TRIED MY DARNDEST—GEE—I SURE HOPE WE SOUNDED ALL RIGHT IN THAT MIKE
STUDIO



"THE WAY I LOOKED BEFORE I took Fleischmann's Yeast. I hated going anywhere, my face was so broken out."

PAUL NOW—PIMPLES GONE "Fleischmann's Yeast sure cleared up my skin fine," he says.

a fellow feels pretty low about having to go around when his face is all broken out with mean-looking pimples. I get so I hate to be seen. I hate why I'm mighty glad to tell others about what a swell pimple chaser Fleischmann's Yeast is. Every boy that wants to get rid of pimples ought to eat it.

Paul Shea

Clears up Adolescent Pimples

AFTER the start of adolescence, from about 13 to 25, important glands develop. This disturbs the body. The skin gets oversensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin and pimples appear.

Fleischmann's Yeast helps clear up pimples by clearing these skin irritants out of the blood. Then—pimples go!

Eat 3 cakes a day—a cake about ½ hour before each meal—plain, or in a little water.

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Only $1.00 DOWN 10 MONTHS to PAY!

Your Choice of These Amazing Jewelry Values!

Genuine Blue-White Diamonds—Fine Watches Yours For Only a Few Cents a Day!

JUST send your name and address with only $1.00 deposit—stating age, occupation and if possible 1 to 2 credit references. All dealings strictly confidential. **No direct inquiries — no red tape — no interest or extras — no C.O.D. to pay on arrival.**

10 FULL MONTHS TO PAY—10 DAY FREE TRIAL

If you can surpass our values anywhere, just return your selection and we will promptly refund your full deposit. If fully satisfied after **10 Day Trial Period** pay only the small amount stated each month.

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

Every ring or watch carries ROYAL'S written guarantee backed by 42 years of fair and square dealing. **Make your selection now — take 10 months to pay.**

Only $24.50

3 Genuine DIAMONDS
$2.35 a Month

LJ-1 . . . Exquisite engagement ring of 14K Solid White or Yellow Gold. Fiery, genuine blue-white center diamond; matched diamond on each side. (Specify color gold desired.) **Only $2.35 a month.**

Both for $29.75

Only $2.87 a month

4 Genuine Diamonds

LJ-6 . . . Perfectly matched "Queen of Hearts" engagement and wedding ring ensemble of 14K Solid White or Yellow Gold. Engagement ring is set with a fiery, genuine blue-white diamond, and the wedding ring with 3 matched diamonds. Specify gold desired. **Both for only $2.87 a month.**

If purchased separately:
LJ-6A . . . Engagement Ring only . . . $19.75
LJ-6B . . . Wedding Ring only $12.50
$1.00 Down — Balance 10% Monthly

$29.75

Latest 17 Jewel BULOVA
Only $2.87 a month

LJ-3 . . . BULOVA'S "Goddess of Time"! Guaranteed 17 Jewel BULOVA movement. Tiny, square case in charm and color of natural gold. Silk cord bracelet. **Only $2.87 a month.**

Only $27.50

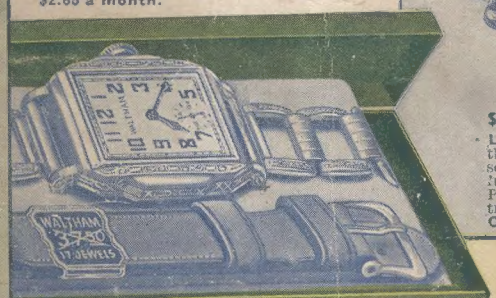
Ladies' 7 Diamond CLUSTER RING
Only $2.65 a month

LJ-2 . . . Dazzling ladies' square prong cluster ring, expertly set with seven finely matched fiery, genuine diamonds. Looks like a $450.00 solitaire. 14K Solid Yellow Gold ring. **Only $2.65 a month.**

$14.50

A ROYAL SENSATION!
Only $1.35 a month

LJ-4 . . . Ladies, baguette type wrist watch in streamlined permanent white case; fully guaranteed movement. Matched bracelet. **Only $1.35 a month.**



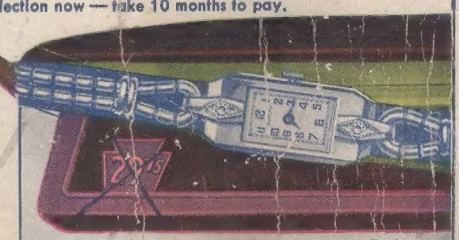
$1.59 a month — Only $16.95

Diamond, Initial Ring

LJ-7 . . . Gentleman's initial ring, very attractively priced. 10K Solid Yellow Gold, set with a brilliant, genuine diamond and 2 Solid White Gold Initials on contrasting, genuine black Onyx. (Specify initials desired.) **Only $1.59 a month.**

17 Jewel WALTHAM "Diplomat" *Extra Leather Strap FREE!*
$2.37 a month — Only $24.75

LJ-8 . . . Imagine this for only $2.37 a month! Factory guaranteed famous 17 Jewel WALTHAM "Diplomat" at a remarkably low price. Richly engraved, permanent white case with link bracelet to match and a smart, new leather strap included FREE. Usually $37.50 — now offered complete as shown at the sensationally low price of only **$24.75 — $2.37 a month.**

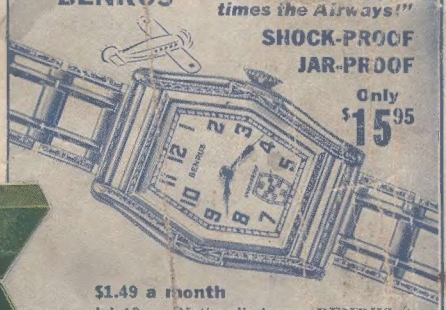


2 Diamond Baguette
Only $1.87 a month — Only $19.75

LJ-9 . . . One of America's smartest Baguette wrist watches at an especially low price. Elegantly styled, modern lifetime case set with 2 genuine diamonds; fully guaranteed movement. Smart link bracelet to match. **Reduced to $19.75 — only $1.87 a month.**

BENRUS *"The Watch that times the Airways!"*

SHOCK-PROOF
JAR-PROOF



Only $15.95

$1.49 a month

LJ-12 . . . Nationally known BENRUS at the price of an ordinary watch! Handsomely engraved white case fitted with a fully guaranteed SHOCKPROOF, JAR-PROOF, BENRUS movement. New type triple link bracelet to match. $15.95 — **Only $1.49 a month.**

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